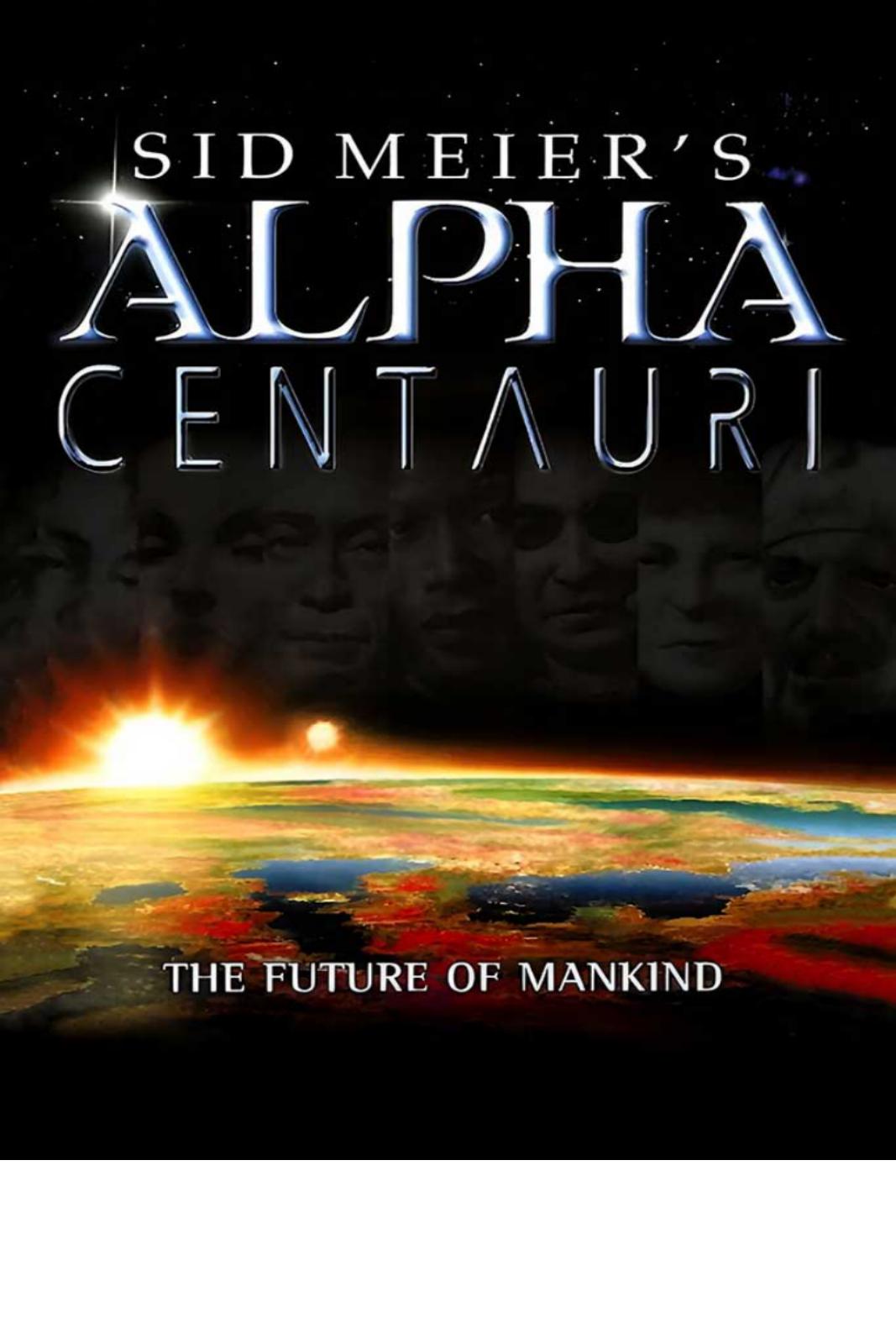


SID MEIER'S  
**ALPHA  
CENTAURI**



THE FUTURE OF MANKIND

# **Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri**

Short Stories from the [game's website](#)  
by Michael Ely

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# **Journey to Centauri**

*Journey to Centauri* is an episodic tale that details the splintering of the U.N. Alpha Centauri Mission on its way to the new world.

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## Episode 1

"Captain."

Shapes. Shadows, hovering over him. A sense of threat, darkness eclipsing his vision, and the distant sound of warning klaxons. He tried to lift his hands and could not, tried to speak and felt his throat turn to fire. A deep cold pressed down on him, crushing his bones to ice.

"...this one...hurry" The voice again.

More movement, seen through layers of frost and glass. *I am the Captain* came his next thought, sharp and coherent. *I should be first....*

First out of the sleep. Visions returned to him: the long rough cylinder of the ship, floating above the chaos of Earth. The massive cryobays with their rows of sleeping crew, the white-suited cryotechs moving ghostlike among them. His last memory of laying down in glass and feeling the blue tide rise to swallow him, forty years and a moment of darkness ago. Thinking, *hoping*, that when he woke again, it would be to the sight of Alpha Centauri's primary cresting the rim of a new planet, a new world.

But now...something was wrong. Someone, unauthorized, moving around the ship. A wave of dizziness washed over him and his vision blurred into a sea of blue, red lights flashing in the distance. He could feel the ship shaking beneath him.

"We move..."

A shadow passed over him, and then another. Footsteps retreated. He stared up through the curved top of the cryocell, willing himself into the open spaces of the ship, trying to force his fingers to move. His brain signaled alarm but his heart and muscles, held in near stasis, would not respond.

He waited, helpless, while the ship hurled on and the warning klaxons sounded their three beat sequence.

After interminable moments he heard a click and a hiss, and then a storm exploded beneath him.

Transmission Received,  
U.N.S. Unity Central Processor.

Meteor Impact Detected.  
Fusion drive shut down.  
Severe Damage Hydroponics Mods 2, 3;  
cryobay 7.

Triggering automatic wakeup of core  
staff per coded instructions.

## Episode 2

Pravin Lal awakened to the hiss of the transparent capsule door breaking its seal and the feel of the ship's foundation shaking beneath him. His heart began to pound and he closed his eyes, breathing deeply, seeking calm.

When his heartbeat slowed he opened his eyes once more. His training had prepared him for this: disorientation, sleep sickness, a deep fatigue that seemed to nest in his bones. He spit the respirator from his mouth and pulled the IVs from his arm, then lifted his hands, placed them on the glass lid above, and pushed.

The cryocell opened. He was alive.

Around him stretched the expanse of cryobay two, silent and vast, filled with over a thousand identical glass capsules, each one bathed in a pale blue light, each with tubes and cables snaking down to conduits in the floor. Over a thousand crew, but his eyes immediately, reflexively, turned to the cell at his left. He climbed to his feet and, ignoring the chill, crossed to it.

He looked down through the glass. There, beneath the frost and bluish tint of the cryogel, he could make out her soft brown shape, indistinct, and the darkness of her long hair. Pria. She looked so peaceful, so far away...he still remembered her gentleness, and their last strong kiss before the cryotechs closed the cell, locking her away from him.

His practiced eyes scanned the small console above her cell. Everything appeared normal; she had survived. His eyes flickered once across the manual release key, and then he saw the red warning lights flashing at the far end of the cryobay. The ship... he had almost forgotten the danger. He brushed Pria's cell with his fingers one more time and then turned away.

From a metal shelf at the foot of his vacated cell he lifted a folded uniform... sleek, comfortable, in the sky blue of the mission's Chief of Surgery, with the U.N. seal on the breast and no country-of-origin markings visible. The Captain had lobbied strongly for that.

He slipped into the uniform and flipped on the small computer sewn into the uniform's sleeve. Status report: the Captain would emerge from cryosleep shortly, along with the Chief Science Officer and some emergency support staff. It appeared that large portions of the ship's hull had been damaged, along with two of the three hydroponics modules. The fusion drive had shut down.

Pravin entered the Returned to Duty code and headed for the command bay. The ship was racing towards Centauri system at tremendous speed, and without the fusion drive there was no way to stop.

Log Entry Received,  
Pravin Lal, Chief of Surgery.

I have awakened to find the mission in jeopardy. I go now to join my Captain in the command bay, ready to learn what has gone awry.

I pray the integrity of the ship's datacore remains true. It is the last hope of humankind...all of our knowledge digitized for transit to the new world. If Earth has not survived these last 40 years, then our future lies in the heart of this damaged ship.

## Episode 3

Captain Garland felt the storm of bubbles boil up around him, turning the thick cryogel to liquid. Fiercer now, growing violent, pounding his limbs; *clench your teeth on the respirator, feel its cool silver shape in your mouth*. He still remembered the training.

The chemical reaction that neutralized the cryogel ended, and he found himself floating in liquid. Small heating coils on the inside of his glass cocoon kicked on to warm the liquid, continuing the process of bringing his body back to life. He sucked air from the respirator, waited for the liquid to drain away.

Long moments passed. How many breaths did the respirator cartridge hold? Not many, he remembered, and the liquid should have drained away by now. A malfunction?

He reached up, put his hands on the top of the cell and pushed. His muscles, partially atrophied despite the electromuscular therapy administered by the ship's computer, groaned in protest. The lid would not open. He felt the cold glass against his palms, unyielding, and felt the liquid around his face.

*God waits in heaven, but we are beyond heaven now.* The thought rose unbidden into his mind. He pushed again, angry, but the seal would not break.

He drew another breath and choked, felt a pressure in this throat. No more air. He turned in his watery tomb, pressed again. A panic rose inside of him as he felt his chest compress, his diaphragm forcing the last bit of oxygen from his lungs into his system.

*Not like this...* His hands lashed out, seeking an escape. He could feel his knuckles striking the glass, feel a desperate animal energy howling inside of him, but his prison would not give.

*God waits in heaven, but we are beyond heaven now.* His vision swam into darkness, and he knew what would follow: a final moment of involuntary struggle, and then a return to the infinity from which he had just emerged.

He thought of the crew, the ten thousand crew, still in the sleep, still under his care. Faith would not release them, or repair a broken ship.

He felt his heart pounding, and felt a surge of warmth spreading out through his body. One of his hands struck soft rubber, the seal between the cryocell and the lid, and he dug his fingers in hard. He felt something tear, something give. The seal broke.

He pushed upwards, out of the cell. The lid swung open and cool stale air hit him in the face. He gasped for air, pulling in breaths as icy liquid ran off of his back.

Around him, row upon row of sleeping crew awaited him.

No transmission.

## Episode 4

"Captain. Captain, it is Pravin Lal. Please confirm this signal is reaching you. Over."

Silence.

"I read you, Mr. Lal. I'm awaiting your presence in the command module. It appears we have our work cut out for us."

Pravin smiled at the voice of his captain, sounding clearly from the comm unit woven into the fabric of his collar. He turned his head to respond. "Yes, John. I am outside of Bay Five, and I will reach you shortly."

He quickened his step, anticipating the cramped warmth of the command center after traversing the dark silent ship, and also the more important business of assisting the Captain in finding out what went wrong during their journey. A small asteroid, he guessed, or some kind of space debris...he remembered the odds tallied by the flight computer as being 470 to 1 against such an occurrence, but perhaps their luck had not held.

Or perhaps it was karma, following the humans from their tainted homeworld into the reaches of space.

Pravin stopped before another hatchway and pressed the unlocking studs. As the seal released he glanced around quietly; the ship felt hollow and vast around him, a groaning structure of metal stolen from Earth's crust and propelled into the heavens. When the hatch opened he climbed into a small elevator and pulled the activation lever, listening as the elevator began to whir beneath him, carrying him to the command module at the ship's periphery. He felt the gravity increase as the elevator moved toward the outer carousel of the ship.

The smooth shapes of the cryobays receded beneath him and he examined their surfaces dispassionately. Lonely again. He hoped his mood would improve as the effects of the 40-year sleep wore off. A session in one of the ship's gyropods would help to burn the poisons

away, but he had no time for that now.

The elevator stopped and he opened the exit hatchway, then finally reached the red command module hatch. Unusual...the Captain had left it closed, requiring Pravin to punch in a security clearance that he had committed to memory before the journey. The red hatch swung open.

"Officer Lal."

Captain Garland stood on the other side of the command module, surrounded by computer screens and touchpanels that remained mostly dead, as cold as the space outside. The Captain looked tired, gaunt, his uniform hanging loosely on him, but he held himself straight as Pravin entered. A red Procedural Checklist rested at an angle on the metal table near the center of the command module.

"Captain. Good to see you again, sir."

"It feels like only yesterday, Pravin." The Captain crossed to him and they shook hands. "You and I believed in this mission more than anyone. Now I'm counting on you to help me salvage it."

Before Pravin could answer another of the three red security hatches hissed open. A slender form in the green uniform of a ship's scientist pushed her way into the command module and shook the dark hair from her face.

"Deirdre Skye, reporting for duty," she said, and straightened to face her captain.

## Part 2

Captain Garland watched as Pravin Lal opened a panel and touched a series of activation studs. Around the perimeter of the command module dark screens flickered on and the slanted touchpanels hummed to life. The air began to crackle with a subtle energy as currents dormant for the last 40 years sprang to life, synthesized minds awakening.

Pravin sat up and flexed his fingers, waiting for the touchpanel in

front of him to cycle through its extended wakeup period. As long as there were no medical emergencies on the ship he would man this console, coaxing information from the ship's databases as he might coax a diagnosis from a reluctant patient.

Garland looked around the command module as the screens warmed up. The module was donut shaped, about 10 meters across and ringed by a bank of large screens set in the wall over slanted consoles. The surface of the consoles consisted of flat smooth touchpanels, which accepted input as well as displaying information, reconfiguring themselves based on the user's command sequence. These panels were tied into extensive databanks, optical storage systems sealed in insulated containers in the very center of the ship.

Pravin began to work, his fingers dancing over the panel in front of him, his dark eyes narrowing as he became immersed in his relationship to the machine. Garland looked around again.

"Mister Lal," he said, and Pravin looked up. Garland motioned towards a panel on the other side of the module. As black and cold as space.

"Here too, Captain," came Deirdre's lilting voice with its soft Scottish overtones. Another panel out. Her voice remained calm but Garland could read the tension in her back. Lal crossed to the first broken panel.

"Nothing evident on a cursory glance, Captain. We have taken damage, and the duration of the journey may have taken its toll."

"Very well," Garland answered. "In the meantime let's fire up these consoles and find out what we're up against. Pravin, you know what we're looking for...damage reports, as quickly as possible, and how much we've jeopardized the mission. Deirdre, man the science console and ascertain the status of the crew...how many alive, how many awake, how many dead."

Lal nodded and took his seat, began to punch up the relevant data. A glittering array appeared on the screen before him and he thumbed through it to the damage reports.

"Captain, first reports indicate heavy damage to Hydroponics Mods two and three, as well as heavy structural damage in nearby bulkheads, penetrating through to the drive shield. It is a wonder the drive shut down without tearing the ship apart."

"Mods two and three, leaving only one functional. That plus the nutrient pastes in ship's stowage could support how much of the crew...a third? A half?"

"If revived from the freeze I would say so. It depends on how much of our journey remains."

"And how much of the crew remains, " said Deirdre. "I have no signals at all from cryobay seven."

"Past the shattered bulkhead," murmured Lal. "Dead, probably. All of them."

Just then the hatchway hissed open again, and the Captain looked up to see a shadow cross his threshold.

List of Fatalities  
(Cryocell No Response)

Takala T  
Vence H  
Miller A  
Stobie T  
Luelmo F  
Morin S  
Lindahl P  
Pettersson D  
Landon K  
Mannetje C  
Coble R

[continued Medical Log  
57562A-7B7]

## Episode 5

One of the hatches opened into the command bay with a hiss. Garland looked up to see a form gaunt and angular, bent with age, seeming to fade back into the shadows of the circular accessway.

"Captain."

Garland narrowed his eyes, then straightened as the figure entered. Lal stopped his rapid movements over his console to look up. Deirdre kept her eyes fixed on the readouts in front of her.

"Doctor Saratov," said Garland. The older man kept walking, finally coming to a stop near the oval table in the center of the room, where he rested one hand. Garland looked down and took in the wrinkled skin and the slight tremor that belied the relative youthfulness of the Russian's face. The sleep had taken its toll on all of them, but Saratov, whose 66th birthday came two days after the launch, would certainly be dead by now if it weren't for the stasis of the cryogenic sleep.

Then the Russian looked up, and the captain was caught by the intensity in the blue eyes, and that insatiable thirst for knowledge; the iron will formed in the latter day Russian Republic. The United Nations Mission Council had insisted he was the best, and Garland couldn't divine the political motives that swirled behind every decision. Still, they needed him now.

"Good of you to join us, Prokhor."

"Yes, Captain. I came as quickly as possible." Some of the fire had faded, replaced by the haunted look of a man shadowed by his own mortality. Garland flashed back to the personnel records, and he remembered Saratov's tireless research into genetics and aging. "Selfless," the U.N. Review had called it, but Garland wondered.

"What is the ship's status?" Saratov asked.

"Not good."

"But not yet critical," chimed in Deirdre, though she had yet to meet her superior officer's eyes.

"Officer Skye, tell Doctor Saratov what we've got so far."

A wireframe of the ship appeared on one of the screens and rotated in time to Deirdre's briefing. "The ship has been struck by an unknown body approximately 48 astronomical units out from the planet that is our destination. The fusion drive shut down, as it is programmed to do."

"I know what it is programmed to do." The grating Russian accent. Deirdre stopped. Lal rose from his chair and walked over as Garland motioned Deirdre to continue.

"Very well. Because the drive shut down during deceleration, we are moving at appreciable speeds on a trajectory that will carry us right through the Centauri system. We need to do repairs and restore power within four days or we will overshoot the target planet and exit the system."

"Can we turn the ship around?" asked Garland.

"The ship's computer has found a way to use what little fuel we have left to place us in an elliptical orbit, rather like a comet. We can use the Centauri system's gravity well to return us to the planet a number of Earth years hence."

"A number of years hence? How many?" came Saratov's voice, a bridge of ice between them.

"Fifty seven Earth years."

Saratov's hand slammed down onto the command table. "Out of the question!" he shouted. "We will all die in space!"

Deirdre looked at him angrily and shook her head. "Not all of us." She pointed to a monitor screen with a video feed from one of the six intact cryobays, where over a thousand crew slept under glass. "They could last another eighty years or more in hibernation."

Pravin nodded. "If we could not repair the fusion drive in four days,

it remains our only option. We four could make the necessary preparations, and the rest of the crew would survive until the next go-round."

"Ridiculous!" said Saratov. "You would have us patch the ship with our eight hands and then wander Skye's gardens until we perish."

He turned to the captain. "Let me wake my engineers, Captain, as many as we can, and restart the fusion drive." He rubbed his hands together. "Four days is enough. They accepted the risks when they took on this mission. They are loyal to me...they will fix the ship in time."

The Captain's hand reached up to brush the U.N. seal on his breast. "You recommend waking up how many?"

"Four hundred, Captain. My best and brightest."

"And if they fail to fix the ship and it takes another fifty seven years to return to the planet, you are comfortable signing their death warrant, and dying with them on this ship?"

"Four days is enough," repeated Saratov stubbornly. "I will take the risk, Captain. I will not let this mission slip from our grasp and retire to my quarters a beaten dog."

"We must decide, Captain," said Lal quietly. "We are very close to our destination, and time is of the essence."

Garland nodded, closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and glanced at Saratov. He saw a deep hunger in the Russian's eyes, a hunger that disturbed him, and yet, in this instance, might be enough to save the mission.

"Awaken them," Garland said, and Saratov nodded. Deirdre turned away.

Log Entry Received

Prokhor Saratov, Chief Science Officer

I awaken to find my Captain, his loyal friend Pravin Lal, and my subordinate

Skye turning over the data on our broken ship. I intend to bring my staff from cryosleep and repair the ship by any means necessary.

I will not die in space, so close to the new world.

## Episode 6

Captain John Garland whirled and tensed inside the human-sized gyroscope that served as the ship's main form of exercise, seeking to burn out the remaining poisons of the long sleep. The last two days had seen a flurry of activity as red-suited technicians emerged from their cryocells and set to work repairing the ship, with Doctor Saratov directing their movements from the command bay like a general directing his troops.

A series of beeps began sounding down the last few seconds of his session, and he responded by a burst of furious effort, pulling and tensing with deep reserves of strength, and he was gratified to see the black and yellow patterns ranged around the perimeter of the gyrosphere blur by at fantastic speeds. The final long tone sounded, indicating the end of the session, and he relaxed his body, letting the sphere spin down to a stop.

"Computer, stop and release," he said aloud, and the sphere gave one last half-turn before clicking into place in an upright position. He let out a whooshing breath...he had needed this brief session to shake off the tension of the command bay. The clamps keeping his arms, feet and waist firmly in position began to loosen by a remote signal when a light flashed above the exit hatch.

"Enter," said Garland, and the hatch opened. A young crewmember in a red jumpsuit stuck her body half into the hatch and saluted. Garland nodded, unable to salute back while his hands and feet remained fixed around the rim of the sphere. He felt suddenly vulnerable...why was he constantly jumpy on his own ship?

"Captain, Officer Saratov asked me to tell you personally that he intends to turn on the fusion drive for a short pulse test. He intends to fire one pulse and measure the stress on the ship's structure."

"Is that wise, Ensign Holloway?" The straps released and he stepped down. The young ensign reflexively took a towel from a small cubbyhole and handed it to him.

"Doctor Saratov feels it is. Officer Skye is concerned about the

weakened condition of some of the walls, the Greenhouse in particular," she answered, referring to the last remaining Hydroponics Module.

He nodded, wiping the sweat off of his neck and face. "Then we'd better discuss it further."

Her eyes flickered away from him. "Doctor Saratov was preparing to run the tests as I left the command bay, sir. We may..."

"*We'll wait.*" He pushed through the hatchway and punched the command bay access code on a wall speaker. "Saratov, cancel your tests. We will not push the tests until all hands agree."

"My people assure me it is safe, Captain. We need to move forward in our repairs. We have only...37 hours to reactivate the drive before all hope of stopping the ship in time is lost."

"I said cancel the tests, Doctor. Isn't Lieutenant Skye one of your people?"

A long pause followed before Saratov's voice grated through the speaker. "Very well. Please return to the bridge so we may discuss this further." The link clicked off. Garland turned to the young ensign, angry, until he saw her standing at attention. She stood ramrod straight, ready to serve the mission in any needed capacity, but he could read the concern in her eyes. A child could discern the tensions growing between the members of the command staff.

"At ease, Ensign. You know the ship well...was Lieutenant Skye in the command bay?"

"No, sir. That is, she was, and then she left. After registering her... concerns about the pulse test. Sir."

He nodded. "Thank you, Ensign. Please return to your duties." She nodded and turned to leave. He looked after her for a few moments, plumbing the depths of his memory, chasing a dim awareness... Ensign Holloway. He didn't remember her on the list of emergency engineering staff. He closed his eyes for a moment, then activated a touchscreen under the speaker and typed in a private text link to

Pravin Lal.

Pravin...pls reverify number of cryocells opened under Saratov's command. Use discretion.

He waited for a moment, watching the glowing letters on the touchscreen pulse at him, a hunch waiting to be born into a reality.

*Just a precaution,* he thought, and punched the Send button. He turned away and headed for the shower bay at a brisk pace.

## Part 2

Captain Garland entered the command mod and felt the pleasant post-workout relaxation drain away as the heat and tension of the ship's crisis returned. Pravin Lal still sat hunched over a touchscreen, his normally calm face knitted in concentration. Saratov hunched over another touchscreen at the other end of the bay, flanked by two of his staff, Ensigns Khosa and Webb. Garland could see the sweat glistening on Saratov's brow.

"Doctor Lal, you are relieved for four hours. Get some food and rest."

Pravin looked up, his deep black eyes uncomprehending for a moment, still lost in the computer's dataclouds.

"Affirmative, sir, in one moment please. I am still querying on the medical records you asked for."

Garland nodded. No response from Saratov. "Dr. Saratov, what is the status of the repairs?"

"They progress, Captain. We have 36-point-four hours." He lifted one long finger to point to a set of scrolling white numbers on an overhead screen. "My gift to you...a doomsday clock."

"I should hope not. I don't think spending five more decades in space with you and your crew was in the mission charter."

Saratov cracked a tight smile. "Indeed. We are working around the

clock, but there is this matter of a pulse test. It is somewhat risky, but I feel it is necessary..."

"Understood, but we can not risk further damage to the ship or the remaining crew. Send five of your best people to Hydroponics Mod One and take measurements on the hull. Find out why Skye is worried. There is more than just our lives in the balance."

Saratov nodded. "Very well." He issued a stream of guttural orders into his wrist link. He spoke quickly and sprinkled his speech with so much technical jargon that Garland realized it was almost a foreign language.

Saratov finished the order and looked up as if to take the Captain's measure. "And now, here is something you may want to see, Captain."

Garland walked over to Saratov's station.

"Ensign Khosa has scanned back through the ship's records to decompress the D7 footage captured by the ship's exterior cameras. We began scanning the video matrix for the time just before the hull damage occurred...just before two of the cameras went offline, in fact. Observe."

On Saratov's touchscreen a grid of tiny high-resolution images appeared...records from an array of cameras placed inside and outside the ship, recording and storing compressed images once a second for the entire length of the journey. Saratov tapped one of the squares in the grid and the image inside ballooned out into a larger size. Garland watched.

The camera showed the exterior of the ship, smooth metal arcing away in a man-made horizon. A data readout gave the ship's speed...3,359 kilometers per second, a phenomenally high velocity.

"We all knew the risk," murmured Saratov as if to answer Garland's developing thoughts. "A minuscule particle at this speed would hit the ship like a nuclear warhead."

A few moments passed, and then...

One of the cameras automatically swiveled and zoomed, tracking a foreign body in its range. Garland leaned forward, his breathing quickening...the magnification on the camera quickly increased by orders of magnitude, and still there seemed to be nothing, or perhaps now a speck, a tiny fragment of space-born minerals tumbling through the infinite darkness...

Garland lifted one hand involuntarily...there, a flash of darkness filling the camera, which suddenly jumped and went to static. Saratov quickly tapped up another camera and Garland watched as the side of his ship disintegrated, metal warping and tearing as if burned by a thousand invisible flames.

He strained to hear the explosions, the tearing of metal and the alarm sirens. He imagined the chaos in the ship, cryocells shattering, lives spilling onto cold metal floors, but of course he heard nothing. His throat closed as the magnitude of the event reached him...his crew, his ship, the lives he shepherded, torn away while he slept helplessly.

Garland looked over to Saratov, who watched the screens with a dark fascination, the mathematics of destruction blooming in his head. Garland spoke.

"I trust that proved useful."

"We are using it to calculate the areas of greatest damage to the ship. It was a piece of space debris, purely a random occurrence."

"Transfer the video to the primary logs and mark it...wait." Garland leaned over and pointed at a camera view in the lower left corner of the grid. "What's that?" He tapped the image to expand it as Saratov looked on.

Down one hallway somewhere in the depths of the ship, figures moved, staggering and trying to right themselves as they tumbled from the shock of the impact. Dark figures, keeping to the shadows even as they signaled each other urgently.

Garland watched as one of the figures finally righted itself and moved quickly on, vanishing into the shadows. Followed by

another.

And another.

And another.

Then, abruptly, that camera went out, leaving only static in its wake.

"I knew it," whispered Garland, as he watched the gray static dance on the viewscreen.

Log Entry Received,  
Pravin Lal, Chief of Surgery.

I am currently assisting Saratov's personnel in scanning back through the visual records made since our journey began. Although they probably won't tell us much, they hold a fascination for me...they are our history, and show the passage of time even as we remained unconscious. The prologue to our next chapter, so to speak.

Mostly they show blackness, cold and empty. Endless amounts of it.

Saratov's people are awake and seem to have survived the sleep well. I have issued them stimulants to help them work. We will need every advantage in the coming days.

## Episode 7

"There is someone on the ship. Someone unaccounted for." Captain Garland continued to watch the video matrix, his eyes darting from one camera view to another.

"It most certainly appears so," said Lal, his words hurried and clipped. "But there is no record of any cryocells opened. Could the system have malfunctioned this badly?"

"It is certainly possible," cut in Saratov. "We were struck. Our system is not foolproof. Still, these individuals made stealth a priority."

Garland nodded. "Saratov, have one of your people check the log file. Track down any unusual accesses made to the system. Find out how someone, anyone, could have been awake and moving about before core staff." Garland scribbled an access code on his touchpanel and quicklinked it over to the science console. "Check this as well."

"A section of your personal journals?"

"Yes. These are impressions I recorded after waking up. Impressions of people standing over my cryocell, speaking. Shadows only..."

"Very well." Skepticism flickered on Saratov's face. "We will...look at them for what they are." *Half-dreams* came the unspoken thought, eddying through the command bay. *A frail man's crisis of faith.*

Garland continued to address him. "We should do a sweep of the ship, and station people to watch the security matrix. Alert your staff to be on the lookout for any unusual activity."

"Yes, Captain." Saratov paused, looking down at his own gaunt hand resting on the hard smooth surface of the console. "Should I have my staff arm themselves? If they are in danger, I should have the code key to the armory."

Garland's head snapped around. "The armory!" He sat down at the

nearest console and punched up the entry logs to the armory. "We should have checked it first thing." Thin lines of yellow and green flickered nervously on the touchpanel.

"No breach. Still..." He turned to Pravin. "Has anyone cross-checked the access log? Are we sure it hasn't been tampered with?"

Pravin's fingers danced for a moment. "No breach apparent. Still..."

"Still, the log is a file like any other. What if the log itself were changed?"

"Difficult to say. It is encrypted, but the encryption is not 100% secure."

Saratov cut in. "You are wasting your time. The log is changed hundreds of thousands of times a second, if not more. Unless we can single out a precise timeframe..."

Garland shook his head, tapped his fingers on the edge of his console. "No, never mind that." One hand reached up to brush the U.N. seal on his breast. Abruptly he turned, addressed the young ensign still at the science console.

"Ensign Khosa. Look for a time when the log *wasn't* changed for a period of time. A...break of some kind. Start one day before that video footage, then work forward to the impact, and then backward from that same point." Garland turned to address Saratov. "Doctor Saratov. Send one of your crew to do a visual check on the armory."

"My engineers are valuable, Captain. We have less than 36 hours to repair the ship. I do not believe I should have my people patrolling hallways or hunched over video monitors."

Garland nodded curtly and turned away. "Pravin, we may have to find a few noncritical staff to awaken. In the meantime find the nearest person to the armory and have them do a visual."

"I will do it," came Saratov's voice, sheathed in steel. "But if you believe my people are in danger, we must arm ourselves. You must transfer to me the armory code key."

"Negative. Only Doctor Yang can give out that code."

"Doctor Yang, or yourself."

"There is no reason yet. Those weapons are for use against an external threat until Doctor Yang says otherwise. Now tend to the ship. We need your people with calipers in their hands, not shredder pistols."

Saratov remained still for a moment, and Garland noted the tremble in his hands, held tight against his side. "I will register my concerns in the log. We can not afford any distractions, Captain. Remember that." And then Saratov turned, activating his commlink as he did.

Garland faced Lal again. "Awaken Dr. Yang and 20 security staff. We appear to have taken a part of our past troubles with us."

#### Armory Log File

Armory sealed M.Y. 2060. All weapons accounted for, General Briggs presiding.

Ship's launch M.Y. 2060.

MY 2060 - 2099 : <no incidents recorded>

MY 2099 : Access granted, self-running executable [source: ship's main computer, thread ID 457.456.124.32.12274, validated secure]

MY 2099 : Password changed per instructions, J. Garland.

MY 2099 : Armory hatch released.

MY 2099 : Armory hatch sealed.

MY 2099 : Armory hatch released.

MY 2099 : Armory hatch sealed.

MY 2099 : Restart armory log per coded instructions.

<<RESTART>> : Armory sealed M.Y. 2060.  
All weapons accounted for, General  
Briggs presiding.

## Episode 8

The lid to his cryocell hissed open, and Sheng-ji Yang emerged into darkness and immediate danger. From the shadows surrounding his cell peered the narrow deadly eyes of shredder pistols, their barrels leveled directly at him.

Sheng-ji stood calmly, using his hand against the cryocell to steady himself as waves of post-sleep nausea washed over him. *No weakness...*his eyes flickered in the darkness, marking the position of every enemy. He could not see their faces...the main lights in this bay appeared to be malfunctioning, or shut down, and he could see only the other cryocells with their soft blue glow, like phosphorescent flowers in a field of darkness.

He willed his muscles to relax with exquisite control. His eyes flickered, just once, across the black metal lockbox on the shelf at the foot of his cryocell. He wouldn't betray his intentions by looking at the box again, but in his mind he carefully reconstructed the exact positioning of the box on the shelf, its exact height from the floor and the position of the softly glowing shape of the digital print lock. The lockbox carried his personal arsenal: his shredder pistol, a submission rod and several sets of organic restraints.

"Move away from the cell. Follow the exact path we have laid for you." came a harsh, gravelly voice from a knot of shadows only two cells away. He looked down to see small glowing blue dots on the floor leading away from his cryocell. *Why?*

"On whose orders?" he asked, his throat husky from disuse...*let the games begin.*

"Do not answer him," came a soft, steely voice from a position, amazingly, even closer than the other, a peculiar dark knot of shadows barely an arm's length away. A chill crossed him, briefly... that this person dared to crouch so close to him. He read the shadows quickly, making out a silhouette. The shadow...this person...waited with catlike alertness, their spine burning tight as a wire. *Who?*

"Do not answer this man," the voice continued. "You are forbidden to speak to him. And, Doctor Yang, do not speak to them. Simply follow the path we have laid out for you."

"Am I to..."

Suddenly the shadow exploded into motion, and a black serpent crossed the distance to Yang in a heartbeat. Yang felt red hot wires of pain lace his neck, and he fell to his knees, cursing the post-sleep weakness that dulled his reflexes.

Psych-whip, a part of him thought calmly. *They have been in the armory.* And then he smiled as the pain intensified...he welcomed it, opened himself to it, letting it dance on his nerves and dissolve into his spine. *Pain, awaken me....*

"We mean you no immediate harm, but I know of your special talents. You must follow my instructions. Do not speak. Crawl along the blue lines."

He looked at the blue dots on the floor, his head still swimming. His eyes flickered up to one corner of the room, a zone of darkness with the vague sense of a metal bulkhead curving. In that darkness he could imagine the bland silvery eye of the security camera staring down at him, but it could not see into the far corner, where the blue dots lead.

He felt the muscles tighten along his back. He felt the cool metal floor beneath his hands.

Abruptly, he stood. Electric tension jolted across the room as shredder pistols twitched to follow him. He could smell the uncertainty...*should we fire?*...and it had the metallic tang of fear.

He took one slow pace along the blue dots, shuffling as if from fatigue, and then every muscle in his body exploded backward toward his cryocell as a yell from the bottom of his lungs split the darkness. One roll and he reached back over his head to take the black metal lockbox into his hands...no wasted motion, no wasted time. He had already seen the action in his mind. And then...

...no turning back, but instead he went up and over his cryocell, the blue light illuminating him for just a moment. A burst of shredder pistol fire crossed the darkness, humming in a cloud all around him, liquefying the glass beneath his feet, and as he leapt he felt the sharp stinging pain of the psyche whip on his back.

A wave of nausea overtook him and instead of fighting it he used it, followed it down, his body spiraling drunkenly into the space behind his cryocell. He could feel the confusion in the room as shadows lurched forward, orders issued in hisses. No shouts and no further fire...*near perfect silence*, he thought. *Amazing discipline, as if....*

No matter. He had moments, and moments were all he needed. Crouched in the darkness he punched the Release code into his lockbox. He flexed his hands, deadly weapons in their own right, serpents awaiting their venom.

The box would not open. It remained inert, a block of dead cold metal in his hands. He turned it quickly face up, tried to make out the letters printed on top. A. Shaw. They had switched lockboxes on him.

A shadowy form rose above him, and he caught a sliver of blue light across familiar features.

"You..." he said, wanting to buy time.

A dark metal shape crashed into him, and his vision burst into blue fireworks on a night black sky.

From the Unity Library,  
Doctor Yang's Collection:

Weapons are the tools of fear;  
a decent man will avoid them  
except in direst necessity  
and, if compelled, will use them  
only with the utmost restraint.

He enters a battle gravely,

with sorrow and with great compassion,  
as if he were attending a funeral.

Tao Te Ching,  
Steven Mitchell trans.

## Episode 9

"Where is Doctor Yang? He should have arrived by now." Garland's question, not directed at anyone in particular but not quite rhetorical, floated into the confines of the command module. He ran his finger around his collar...it seemed to be getting hot as the tension on the ship increased.

A new Ensign, Martchenko, had taken Khosa's place at the science console. He spoke up quickly.

"That is correct, Captain." He punched up a schematic of the ship, got a highlight of Yang's cell. "Cryobay three, cell 457. Open."

"Then where did he go?"

"Where indeed?" came the voice, laced with the hiss of static, coming from the comm unit unbidden.

"Trace it!" shot Garland, then crossed to the communication console. "Sender, this is Captain Garland. Identify yourself." Saratov had frozen, reading the situation, trying to force this turn of events into logical structures that left little room for human ambiguity. Garland stopped watching him, refocused on the voice.

"This is Corazon Santiago, Captain, of the security staff. Dr. Yang is with me." Garland's hand lifted to the insignia on his uniform as he scanned back through the ship's rosters. Santiago...the woman's voice sounded smooth, commanding, brusque...elegant yet strangely flat.

The touchscreen at the comm console flickered and changed to a dossier: name, Corazon Santiago, a minor security functionary under Dr. Yang. A Lieutenant, placed in charge of a division of men and women, about a hundred, for no immediately apparent reason. She had stern features, light brown skin...born in Puerto Rico and moved to Mexico City, then finally ended up in New Los Angeles. All violent places now, riddled with gang fights, fires, riots...par for the course in the last days of Earth.

Deep brown eyes stared at him defiantly from the digitized picture.

"As you may know by now I was released from the cryosleep by a self-executing agent placed into your system by a...friend back on Earth. I and fifty of my companions are members of the Spartan Coalition...do you know of us?"

In a small panel a printout of her words spooled...Garland highlighted Spartan Coalition and punched up a link. "A group of radical survivalists based in New Los Angeles with extensive political connections. Determined to secure the survival of humanity during the increasing chaos of the late 21st century. Sounds like you're just one of us."

She laughed. "I assure you I mean you no harm. I and my people only intend to be given a fair share of the ship's supplies and placed on a deserted section of Planet to pursue our own destiny."

"And how does that differ from the rest of us? Do you question our will to survive? Why would you need to alter the ship's records and endanger the mission for that?"

"Look around, Captain. This mission stinks of politics under a veneer of idealism. We crave survival, pure and simple, and this focus gives us power. We wish to play out our destinies on our own terms."

The Captain's eyes flickered rapidly as he tried to absorb her demands and determine the danger to the ship and its thousands of sleeping crew.

"Then why contact me now? If your only goal is survival in its purest form, why can't you pursue that as easily on this ship or on Earth itself?" A pause. "You must realize by now that the ship is off course. If we do not repair it within 34 hours, we will overshoot the Centauri system and be unable to return for decades." Another pause. Reading the silence. "You can't fix the ship alone. We're in this together."

When her voice came back he could hear the anger in it, the violence boiling beneath the surface. "I want no philosophical

debates with you, Captain. Our course is firm. Fix the ship if you must, but with our presence discovered we must take steps to protect our position. Nothing else matters, and we will survive because of it."

"Because of a single-minded focus that jeopardizes the mission?"

"Exactly because of that." He could feel a cold satisfaction humming through the commlink. Pravin Lal shook his head; they could all feel the finality in her voice.

"Then what do you want?"

"I'm sending one of my representatives to the command bay. We will discuss it further then."

"We can not allow a...mutinous crewmember in the command bay."

"You can, Captain. I am telling you that you can. Do not seal the lift or we will begin picking off engineering crew one by one."

Garland heard a Russian curse cut the air like acid. Garland thought furiously...what do they have? How many are there?

He had to buy time.

"Very well, Corazon. Send your representative, and leave the maintenance crew unmolested."

"Do not call me by my first name, Captain. Remain in the command bay; we will see you shortly." The transmission ended. Captain Garland crossed to Lal.

"Where is she?"

"The communication originated from a storage room off of cryobay three, the bay where both she and Dr. Yang slept."

"A large part of the security team is in there." He paced once across the bay, once back. "Determine how many they have..."

"Of course, Captain." Pravin switched back to a formal mode of

address as the crisis deepened.

Garland turned to Ensign Martchenko. "Get this Santiago's dossier. And hurry the check on that armory log thread. We need to know if they have weapons."

The young ensign began clicking the touchpanel frantically. Garland let out a deep breath and looked down at the security matrix. Several cameras were out now, or the rooms they observed remained dark. Systematic sabotage, or circuits worn down from the long journey?

"Do you think they'll attack? How serious are they?" he asked quietly. More half-rhetorical questions. Captain Garland looked up to the low ceiling of the command mod, where the United Nations star seal had been etched into the metal. The damaged ship...

He turned to the science console. "Commander Saratov, we must..."

But the gaunt Russian was nowhere in sight. Saratov was gone.

Ship's Transmission,  
Prokhor Saratov

The conflict with the mysterious insurgents has jeopardized my engineers' ability to repair the ship in good time. All here are consumed with the immediate conflict, but I keep my eyes to the new world, always.

The Captain may order my people into battle, and I must prepare for this. I will not be caught off guard.

## Episode 10

Prokhor Saratov paused in one of the ship's long cylindrical accessways and brushed his fingers along the seam of a ventilation duct. He wrinkled his brow, as if concerned about structural damage, and his eyes flickered up and down the accessway. Broad yellow stripes stretched along the wall in each direction; this accessway remained slated for heavy equipment and supply transport only.

There were cameras, of course, but few people to monitor them. All hands were directed toward repairing the ship, including his own. But first he had a job to do.

The silver ventilation duct opened and seemed to swallow him. A moment later, the accessway stood empty.

Saratov breathed deeply, trying to remain calm in the narrow confines of the ventilation duct. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled, wrapping a length of lightweight polishing cloth around his hands to muffle their impact on the strong yet flexible surface beneath him. He had shut down all the infrared sensors along this path for one hour.

He could feel pain pulsing up and down his spine already. He crawled on, through small tunnel after small tunnel, following pathways displayed on his tiny wearable computer. Left, left, right, down dark and narrow paths. His joints ached, and the air stuck in his throat. Darkness closed in on him, and then...

There. Ahead, a small grate, crisscrossed by infrared beams he was not authorized to deactivate. Through the grate he could see a small room with red stripes swashed along the walls.

Craning his arm he pulled a small thermal tool from his belt and edged up to the crisscross of beams. He turned on the tool, calibrated its temperature carefully to a point far below freezing, and directed its icy bluish spray onto the glass nodes of the infrared detectors. One, two, three, quickly moving from one to the next. His hand trembled a bit but his eyes remained flinty, analytical, timing

his movements with decimal point precision.

At the last node he pushed through, his hands on the grate and pressing, ignoring its clatter on the floor as he emerged from a tiny opening some five feet off the floor. He fell and landed hard on a cold metal floor.

To his left, a nondescript red metal door at the end of the narrow room he had entered. The words 'Weapons Bay' were stamped across the edge seal of the door. Beyond that door, the armory. And the other direction...an antechamber, perhaps filled with renegade crewmembers.

He had no keycard to open the Weapons Bay, and if he had one he could not have used it without triggering a signal in the command bay anyway, but that didn't matter. Someone had rewired the door logs already; that was obvious.

He punched a simple access code into the door and it unlatched with a clicking sound. No alarms, no footsteps, no summons from the Captain.

The great red door swung open, and Saratov walked through.

## Part 2

"Find Saratov!" Captain Garland shot to Lal. Ensign Martchenko sat rigid at his own console, but Garland ignored him. At this moment Garland trusted Lal, to the exclusion of anyone else in command.

Except perhaps Skye. Skye...

He punched a link to her. "Officer Skye, acknowledge immediately."

"Yes Captain." Her voice sounded crisp and smooth, professional in this time of crisis. "I read you."

"We have discovered insurgents on the ship. Crewmembers moving about without authorization...we don't know how many or exactly what they want. We don't believe they are in your area, but you need to be careful. Have one of Saratov's crew post outside the

Hydroponics module."

"Saratov's people are no longer here, Captain. They left a few moments ago under orders."

Garland froze for an instant, startled. "Did they say why?"

"No, Captain. They were pinging the synthglass panels on the far side of the Greenhouse when a commlink came in. All three of them packed their tools and departed quickly. And Captain...I could use people here. Whether we stop the ship or not, someone will need to eat, and my hybrids need tending. I can't rely on...that is to say, Saratov's people are quite busy."

"Understood. Send your crew requests to the command mod and we'll trigger their wakeup from here. Keep the number to a minimum. Also, activate the motion detectors in the hallway outside the Greenhouse. Be careful, Deirdre."

"Understood." Her fluid voice hung in the air for a moment after Garland closed the link. Then he tapped Lal on the shoulder and issued him quiet orders.

"Where is Saratov? Key in to the tracking unit in his uniform."

"Commander Saratov is...inside a mechanical accessway. The delta on the tracking module is not zero, so he must still have it on his person...wait, he is moving only...2 centimeters...and now one and a half centimeters the other direction..."

"Get a visual." He glanced over at Saratov's ensign, Martchenko. He could practically see the man's ears burning.

"Captain." On Lal's screen flickered the image of a wide circular accessway. There was no sign of life. "The tracking module puts him in that hallway, shifting slightly back and forth..."

Garland leaned over and scanned the image carefully. "Wait. Zoom in, here. Enhance." Lal's fingers danced, and a spot on the floor expanded in a series of fluid jumps.

There, on the floor: a tiny metal and glass cylinder, rolling back and

forth on the curved floor of the hallway.

"He's pulled his tracking unit out, or it's fallen out. But where is he?"

Lal punched up a schematic of the ship. "The accessway leads to cargo bays on either side, full of equipment in one, common supplies in the other. But...here, a small maintenance duct. Leading to..." The schematic whirred along the length of the duct.

"The weapons bay." said Garland. "But he can't open it."

"Unless the code has already been broken. He may have reason to believe that it has."

"Open the datalinks. Reconstruct whatever he was doing on his console before he left, keying on that magenta color the computer uses to highlight final results."

"There's no need, sir." came the gruff voice of the young ensign. "I believe the commander had something running here before he left."

Garland crossed to the science console and looked on the screen.

"Can you interpret?"

"The armory log file, usually updated several thousand times a second, had no updates for a period of over three seconds during this time frame." He flicked his hand towards a highlighted time range sometime before the ship had been hit. "It must have been tampered with, sir."

"So Santiago's people must have gotten in. They are armed."

"Captain. Look at this as well." Lal's lilting voice had gotten faster and more clipped, excited. "Most of the engineers have moved into the same general area. Near the weapons bay."

Quicklink [encrypted] :

Orig: Commander Saratov

Recip:

EmergEngineer@science.unac.unity

[subset: Trusted]

Stabilize current assignment, then converge on attached coords. Ensigns Preuss, Landon, Ritzka move immediately. Use caution, discretion.

## Episode 11

"Commander Saratov. Commander Saratov! Respond immediately." Garland stopped to listen, searching the pure silence of the commlink for any sign of reply.

"Nothing, Captain," said Lal.

"Try one of these engineers we're tracking. Try this one..."

"Saki." Lal tapped a glowing indicator on the screen and a channel opened immediately. "Lt. Saki come in. This is Commander Lal and Captain Garland, in the command mod."

A pause, thick with hesitation. Finally..."Yes sir. Sirs."

"What are your orders, Lieutenant? What has Commander Saratov ordered you to do?"

"He has ordered us to the Weapons Bay, sir. Is there something amiss?" That last word...'amiss'...sounded strange to Garland, like a word out of an 19th century play, so polite.

"Has Commander Saratov told you anything about your assignment?"

"Negative, Captain. Is everything all right, sir?"

"Radio me when you reach your Commander, Lieutenant. We have lost contact with him and we are concerned." Not exactly a lie but not the whole truth either, thought Garland as he broke the link.

"Saratov must be taking matters into his own hands, fearing for the safety of his crew. He wants to distribute weapons, and with these insurgents in the ship I can't quite blame him..." Garland paused, again looking up at the U.N. symbol etched into the command mod's ceiling.

"What will you do, Captain? We must fix the ship, and Saratov is acting against orders.'

Garland let out a deep breath. "Not completely against orders. The safety of the crew must be our first concern. I can't push this issue with Saratov while the ship remains damaged. But I can go down there and locate him."

"A moment," responded Lal, soft and urgent. "Two of Saratov's engineers have reached the antechamber to the Weapons Bay. I believe they are opening it..."

## Part 2

Paul Landon and Diana Preuss, engineers under Saratov's command, pulled the release lever and waited as the first set of security doors swung open. Landon stood to one side, flexing his muscles nervously, his hands gripping a concussion hammer tightly. His palms felt hot and sweaty, but when he glanced at Diana she stood calmly, ice cool, a thin smile frozen on her face.

A sliver of light slipped from between the doors and expanded as they swung to their full open position. Landon caught Preuss' eyes and they both moved to the sides, listening intently, staying in the shadows. As the doors reached the full open position they looked at each other, communicating urgently with their eyes alone.

*Use caution, discretion,* Saratov had told them, and directed them to a set of coordinates centered on the other side of this antechamber they had opened. Caution from what?

For long moments they waited, scarcely breathing. Landon's senses were in overdrive...he could hear the quiet groaning deep inside the ship, and he could feel his pulse pounding in his ears. The antechamber yawned darkly between them. Landon gestured to his wrist and pointed inside...

Preuss motioned in the negative. She pointed at the ground.

One faint shadow, stretching from the antechamber, shifting slightly as if something were moving between several lights. A hiss of breath escaped from Landon's lips.

From behind them came footsteps, and another red suited engineer

entered the hallway, footsteps echoing on the metal floor. Landon turned...it was Ritzka, another engineer with combat training, arriving early. Coincidence?

Landon started to signal him but comprehension had already washed over Ritzka's face. He paused for one split second, rooted to the floor, and then threw himself to one side.

There was a small cracking sound and a peculiar metallic thump. Landon looked wildly down the hall as Ritzka's eyes flashed with panic and he crawled rapidly into the cover of the shadows along the hallway. That cracking sound...

There. Landon could see it...a small hole, as if the metal in the wall had been melted by a burning coal, about three feet to the right of where Ritzka had stood. Shredder pistol, set to fire in pulse rather than spray mode, and set at low power so it didn't puncture the metal.

Landon moved farther back into the shadows, his breathing quiet and shallow. His fingers crept to the 'on' switch of the concussion hammer, but he didn't push it yet. He heard the rustle of cloth, and then the quiet clicking of a computer touch screen from inside the antechamber.

His eyes shot to Preuss' and he caught the quick nod. His muscles, wound tight from the tension of waiting, exploded into action as he rushed into the antechamber. Bright lights burned his eyes for a moment and he caught a quick adrenaline-pounding glimpse of a small cylindrical chamber, broad red swatches on the wall, another set of sealed doors, and off to one side a small but muscular man in a red security uniform, kneeling against the wall and typing into his quicklink.

Landon hissed out a breath and felt the concussion hammer jolt to life in his hands. The small security guard rolled quickly and a shredder pistol appeared in his hand...he moved his arm as if to sweep the chamber but the pistol was still on pulse mode, and Landon heard the pock pock pock of single shots hitting the metal around him.

He lunged and lost his footing, the concussion hammer jolting the floor and sending a nerve-jangling vibration through his hands and arms. Scenes flashed...he could see Preuss leaping like a cat, and then he heard two more pocks and a meaty thump, and she fell hard and fast to the ground, her legs cut out from under her. Her forehead hit the ground hard and Landon could hear the crack even as he came back to his feet and the little tight man in red, the security guard, rolled across the chamber.

A pause. A heartbeat, as the little man flipped something on his weapon.

*No.*

Landon scrambled forward, feeling the bile rise in his stomach, smelling the reeking sweat of desperation as he tried to move forward while keeping his head low. He heard Preuss yell, a strong yell that cracked at the end, and then there was a hum and a black cloud filled the chamber, and then he saw her torso turn into a cloud of blood swirling backwards along the wall.

He clawed his way to his knees and swung the concussion hammer, and felt the impact rock his arms and bones as the blow landed on the side of the little man's head. Landon heard a sickening snap, and looked away from the blow, only to feel his right leg turn into fire. He felt his jaw fall open, his muscles losing control, and turned to see the blood patterns on the wall, swirls of red that used to be his leg.

Blood on the walls of the Unity. The world turned to darkness, and Landon fell.

Ship's Logs

Paul Landon, Engineering Staff

Weapons are tools," Commander Saratov once wrote. "Their function is violence; when used by a technician, rather than a warrior, they can fulfill their intended purpose: to assist in clearing out the useless to

make way for the functional.

"And, like any tool, they can help humankind to make the inevitable happen more quickly."

## Episode 12

Deirdre Skye stroked the collar of her uniform and looked out through the transparent wall panels of Hydroponics Module One, tracing their path as they curved down to join the ship's hull. Beyond them she could see the vast sweep of space, the stars swimming around the ship as the Unity hurled forward. From this vantage, at the edge of Mod One, she could also see the surface of the ship stretching away from her, weirdly shaped scraps of metal rising up across a burnt and twisted landscape, the remnants of their collision.

Across the damaged surface she could see the dark edge of cryobay seven and its associated living facilities. The edge of the cylinder had caved in, but beyond that it looked intact. Still, they had no contact with bay seven, no signs of life. It was this burnt landscape outside her very windows that had led Deirdre to caution the Captain about Saratov's rush to trigger the pulse test.

"Deirdre."

She turned to see the Captain walking toward her, pushing through the branches of some dwarf avocado trees. Nearby two of her staff were packing the rough green fruits into lightweight foam coolers.

"Captain." She took a sip from the silver mug in her right hand and looked over the climate control tiers of the Greenhouse.

"How do the gardens look?"

"Quite well, actually. The plants have been on artificially lengthened growing cycles for the duration of our trip, blooming and dropping their fruits into compost bins, then continuing the cycle again." She turned to him. "We forgot they can do that without human interference. They have since the dawn of time."

"And now that we're interfering again?"

"I've shortened the growing cycles and increased fertilizers. Any plants currently blooming are being harvested and stored." She

paused. "About a third of the plants perished in transit, actually a little less than I expected. The rest seem to be holding up, better than our crew, it seems."

Garland cracked a grim smile. "I'm on my way to the Weapons Bay now to see the damage for myself. Two crew have died, and one is in medical. Saratov..."

He stopped, seemed to reconsider his words. "Saratov's men will be back to do the final testing in here. They seem to feel we can put a tension seal on the most vulnerable panels and then this Mod will be all right. We don't have much time...there will be some calculated risks."

Deirdre nodded. "Yes, sir," she said, and turned back to focus on the night outside.

"And as I mentioned, be careful. Santiago's people seem to be isolated to Bay Two, but we're unsure. Watch the door carefully, and we'll have some weapons delivered here. We're still going to try for a peaceful resolution."

Deirdre nodded. The Captain turned and headed for the exit, on his way to the Weapons Bay. Deirdre watched his reflection in the panels, noted idly how the stars seemed to swallow him. She also noted the shredder pistol at his hip, and the uneasy tension in his stride.

## Part 2

Santiago's eyes snapped down to the panel on her wrist as some incoming data signaled for her attention. Yang, bound and held between two of her people, felt a flicker of admiration at the rattlesnake quickness of her movements.

"Pravin Lal has sent a message to the Captain on an unencrypted channel. They have the Weapons Bay secured, and Eckert has died as a result of the attack." Shadows moved in the curve of her jaw as she absorbed the news. "Unfortunate. I did not expect them to move on the Weapons Bay with so few crewmembers."

She looked around. All of her people stood at attention, no one wasting time or breath until she had determined their next course of action.

"Jerek, do we know how many of their crew are awake?"

A strong man with heavy features stepped forward. "We can not tell from here, Colonel. Until our emissary reaches the command mod we will not know, but we do know that the ship has been damaged. They may have awakened any number of emergency personnel to deal with the problem."

Santiago nodded. "Our situation is more unstable than I thought, but instability favors the strong. Let's set up a perimeter in this bay. Ten of you sweep the ship...carefully. Do not interfere with any engineering personnel unless threatened. We are looking for their point of greatest weakness."

A series of rigid nods, and warriors began fanning out.

"We need information. We have more firepower; I should not feel this helpless." Her eyes flickered to Yang, who watched her coldly. "Take him into that storage chamber. Bind him well, but do not speak to him. He is not one of us."

Log Entry Received,  
Deirdre Skye, Chief Botanist.

The plants in Hydroponics Module One appear relatively healthy, all things considered. About two-thirds of them made the journey successfully, living out their life cycles as they always have, even millions of miles from home.

Indeed, with all of us in cryosleep it must have resembled Eden in here, a rich and bountiful garden awaiting the coming of the slumbering humans.

I spend almost all of my time here,  
breathing the richly scented air,  
testing the consistency of the earth.  
I picked and cut a lemon today...the  
tangy smell of it wafting up as I cut  
the skin made my head swim with  
memories of home.

## Episode 13

The doors to the Weapons Bay hissed open, and Captain Garland stepped cautiously into the antechamber. The room felt dim and hollow, tainted by the residue of violence. The lights had been turned down, in respect for the dead.

Garland forced himself to stop and take it all in, and saw for the first time the blood on the wall, black crusted shadows. The video feeds to the antechamber did not function, probably disabled by Santiago, so Garland could only reconstruct the scene in his mind. Here one crewmember had been cut down, the wall behind peppered with shredder impact marks. Here a trail where one crawled across the floor, ending in a thick dry pool. Members of his crew...

He crossed the chamber and entered the Weapons Bay proper, where Prokhor Saratov still waited, along with an engineer who served as a guard. The guard looked fairly muscular, even after the ravages of the cryosleep, but he shifted uneasily from foot to foot and held the bulky machine pistol awkwardly. He was an engineer, not a soldier.

Racks of weapons rose above and around them in cramped darkness of the Bay. Garland thought the space reflected the philosophy of the United Nations Council perfectly. Small, smaller than any cargo space, as if it were added as an afterthought, but once you got inside it was jammed full of hardware. Killing hardware, from lightweight shredder pistols to more powerful machine pistols, atomic mortars, fusion drills, their dark hard forms reflecting their function -- threatening and aggressive. The bay seemed to embody a belated realization that perhaps violence would find humanity even in the stars.

Near the back of the room Saratov hunched over a portable terminal, his face bathed in flickering light. "Officer Saratov," Garland greeted him. The Russian glanced up quickly, then snapped closed the portable and stood up.

"Captain." He bowed his head slightly, then looked up again.

Garland took a deep breath and sat down on a curved black container crisscrossed with red warning symbols.

"We do not always see eye to eye, Prokhor. But I do respect your ability, and your intellect." Saratov straightened, a gleam of pride in his eyes. "We need you with us. You were under orders to repair the ship, not to attack..."

The pride vanished in a heartbeat. "This Santiago threatened my engineers."

"Yes, I know."

"It is I who want the ship fixed more than anyone, Captain. That is why..."

The Captain raised his hand. "No matter. We'll deal with all of this later. We will arm your engineers, transport a case of weapons to the command center, and reseal this bay properly.

Saratov nodded. "Agreed."

Garland released a breath. "And I have recorded these events in my log. You may wish to do the same in yours."

Saratov's eyes suddenly flared with anger, then cooled to an amused contempt. "Your log? To be downlinked to Earth?" He lifted one hand, which trembled. "I have armed us, possibly saved the ship..."

"And the record will reflect that. But it will also reflect how your people met Santiago on her own terms, with violence. We have a responsibility to humanity and the U. N. Council, Officer. We cannot forget that. Peace is what we are struggling for."

"The Council is light years away, if it still exists at all."

"I know." The Captain and Saratov faced each other, the shadows of guns crossing the walls around them. Saratov shook his head slightly.

"Do what you must. My desire is only to repair the ship."

The Captain held his eyes, but the Russian remained impassive, unreadable. Not ten meters away, blood dried on the walls and floor of the antechamber. Did that matter to Saratov? One of his own?

"Captain, I have high confidence that we can fix the ship in time. I will request a pulse test within hours. We have almost finished reinforcing the ship's weakened sections."

Garland nodded. "Good. Let's return to the command center. We must be careful until the ship is secured. The twenty security people have not arrived, so we may awaken some from another location."

"And perhaps this Santiago has...infected more of the security staff with her ideas."

Garland nodded. "Or any staff. It is a risk we must take."

"Doctor Yang could assist, but where is he? Under Santiago's guard, or at her side? Who do you trust, Captain?"

Saratov moved by Garland, on his way back to the command center. Garland turned, brushing his fingers across weapons that seemed to wait with a dormant heat.

Codename: Emissary  
Encrypted Link, Colonel Santiago

In motion again, per orders. All silent in bay three. Engineers working at far end remain completely unaware of our presence.

Will move to command center at next opportunity. First, request approval on plan to follow...

## Episode 14

Miriam awakened to the taste of blood in and her mouth and brilliant light filling her vision. She closed her eyes and then opened them again...she could hear her heart pounding in her ears, and her skin felt alive. She could see past jagged edges of glass and up the sloping wall of the chamber outside; she could make out every seam, every scratch up there. And around her, she could hear the creak of the ship, the hiss of air, the pounding of a hundred hearts, her fellow crew, echoing and thundering in the chamber around her.

Her hand, laying loosely by her side, crept up and felt a stickiness on her stomach, and then a hard cold edge inside of her.

*Blood, and glass. Fragments...*

She closed her eyes again, focusing herself. She shifted her thoughts from the random stream of impressions to the concrete, the small, the close. Her lips began to move, reciting short prayers learned back on earth, meditations to pull her through difficult times.

Her heart was pounding, her senses hyperkinetic...stimulants pumped into her system. Her hands could move freely, unconstrained. Blood on her fingers, shattered glass overhead, the slope of metal that was her ship over that. Alive, bathed in light, brilliant light from a nearby star or a vision, the kind she had always craved on Earth.

She moved her hand again, this time up to her throat where a small metal cross once lay against her skin. It now lay somewhere nearby...she could not wear it in cryosleep, but she could imagine it, cool against her skin.

*Miriam.*

A voice, and a light. Pulling her upwards, up to the source.

The mission. The people around her. Her body, injured, her blood as mortal as any other. What had her pastor called the human

body? A "fragile vessel for the soul."

The booming of hearts. Her own heart, racing, in overdrive. The computer monitoring her vital functions was clearly flooding her system with cocktails of drugs and medicines, keeping her alive with single-minded purpose.

*Miriam!*

A voice, and the glass lifting away, more light pouring down on her and then a shadow. A hand, pulling at her, lifting her upwards.

Rising upward, out of her coffinlike shell, she knew that God had spared her for a greater purpose. No shadow would block her way to the one true mission, the mission against which this entire ship and all its crew were but one tiny spark in a burning pyre.

An arm went around her, and she felt its warmth encompass her.

*Resurrection.*

Ship's Medical Log  
Stasis Report, Cell 986  
Subject: Miriam Godwinson

00: Cell integrity breached.  
Triggering automatic wakeup.

01: Elevated heartbeat 120 bpm, blood pressure falling to 90/60. Events suggest injury and moderate to severe bleeding. Administering 10 mcg dopamine, pressure lowered in cell [staunch bloodflow]

02: Continued elevation in heartbeat 128 bpm. Blood pressure 84/67. Continue administer dopamine, morphine.

03: Subject not responding. Link to central databanks failed. Code red.

04: Code red.

05: Code red.

06: [offline]

## Episode 15

Santiago's Emissary slipped one foot and then the other into the tough, rubbery leg of the pressure suit and pulled it up around her waist. Her hands shook slightly and she clamped down on her emotions with an iron will, bunching the muscles in her forearm as if she could force the fear from her extremities. She slipped the rest of the way into the pressure suit and knitted the front seal closed.

Three meters away, the cool gray barrel of a shredder pistol flicked twice at the helmet-mask resting on a shelf on the wall. She picked up the mask, which resembled a transparent egg with the impressions of a face on one side, opened it and then closed it around her face. Seals activated around her neck and the mask tightened around her face. She had a moment of panic as the thick plastic closed around her, and then her nose and mouth filled with a burst of cold, highly oxygenated air.

She looked back at the figure behind her, already dressed in a pressure suit. He watched her expressionlessly, shredder pistol leveled at her stomach. She looked away and pulled on two gloves, sealing them to the wrists of the suit. Her companion motioned again, this time to the exit hatch. Beyond this hatch lay the outer carousel, an open gridlike structure that wrapped the eight cryobays and rotated around them, using centripetal force to generate a gravity-like effect stronger than that in the bays. Attached to the carousel, on two long arms, were the command center of the ship on one arm and the auxiliary command on the other.

The Emissary punched in the unlock codes, and the hatch spun open to a world of stars. The carousel trundled by, sending a vibration through the Emissary's booted feet. She had timed the opening of the hatch to coincide with the approach of the main arm, which now came into view around the outer shell of Bay Three.

A single sharp prodding from the shredder pistol and the Emissary moved out onto the carousel. She began pulling herself hand over hand towards the base of the main arm. As she neared it the movement of the carousel carried her past Bay Three and over Bay

Four, its textured off-white surface moving past her.

At the base of the main arm waited a small lift. The Emissary tilted her head to glance at a small hatchway, an emergency access through which a person could crawl and then use a series of metal handholds to climb to the command center. A long and frightening climb, with only a light tether holding you to the structure of the ship, and infinity waiting at your back.

She looked away from the emergency access and into the lift, which waited in the ready position. She glanced back at her companion, who motioned her into the lift. They both stepped into the cramped space and her companion pulled the lever, starting the lift towards the command center.

She looked out as the lift progressed away from the ship and the gravity increased, pressing her feet into the deck. As the long arm moved the ship seemed to turn beneath her, and she could see its cylindrical length gradually revealed. the center of the ship held the eight cryobays and the landers that would carry them down to the planet's surface.

Sandwiching the landing pods were the huge gray fuel canisters that fed the fusion pulse drive, and to the front of the ship she could see the thrusters that directed the tremendous energy of the fusion pulses into space. The ship had rotated before deceleration so that the fusion drive could slow them down, but the thrusters, ringed by the massive bronze-colored radiators, now lay dormant. She watched the ship coolly, having little knowledge of the science behind the collision that had crippled them. It was enough for her to remain alive, and to perhaps advance her leader's mission in some unforeseen way.

The lift neared the end of the arm. Somewhere above, in the command center, a warning light flashed.

Ship's Transmission  
Encrypted Quicklink,  
Santiago to Emissary

Proceed...

## Episode 16

Santiago stood over a cryocell with two of her lieutenants, plotting the movements of her warriors through the ship. As coded communications came in she used a slim etching tool to sketch locations on the semitranslucent curved top of the cell, oblivious to the cryogenically frozen face staring up from below.

"We are still playing cat and mouse with the armed staff of the ship," she said in clipped tones. "I am looking for leverage, and a place to move against them. We have weapons and a makeshift fortress, but we still lack all we need to thrive."

"The command center?" asked the slender man to her left. She glanced over at him; Shen was physically unimposing but his veins ran with ice; she had never seen his fear control him.

She shook her head. "Too difficult. If the Captain allows the Emissary into the command center we will have a foothold there, otherwise we will have to advance up the main arm one by one, with the crew picking us off at their leisure. We need another location to use as a diversion, or, if the Emissary fails, as our primary objective."

"We've discussed the cryocells," grated the larger man to her right. Pierce, his sleeves rolled up to show forearms crisscrossed by hundreds of razor-thin scars. "We have a thousand helpless hostages right here," he tapped his shredder pistol on the surface of the cryocell in front of them.

"Our last resort, and a good one, but it amounts to an ultimatum. For now, I am considering this location." She tapped a crude schematic etched into the cryocell.

"Why not just remain in our current location?" asked Shen, his narrow eyes flitting to her face.

"There is an old Samurai saying: 'I run to fight, I run to defend.' As long as we remain stationary they can use our position against us. Let them remain in their respective domains...the Captain in his

command center, Skye in her hydroponics, Saratov in his maintenance ducts. They are utterly predictable; we must not fall into that trap."

A two-beat tone sounded from her wrist computer.

"The Emissary has reached the command center. Let's shake them up a bit. Shen, move half of our people near the exit hatch. The other half will come with me. Leave Dr. Yang in his holding cell under guard. Now..." She turned, her movements graceful and defined.

With precision movements, the warriors fanned out.

## Part 2

In the Command Center, Saratov turned to address the Captain. "Captain, we are ready for a pulse test. There is no more time to waste."

The Captain rose and walked over to the science console, where Saratov hunched over a complex web of figures and calculations. "You are certain the ship is as safe as you can make it?"

"Ninety-four percent certainty, Captain. Remember, there will only be one of the pulses, to measure its effects on the ship's structure."

"But it could still split us open in a fireburst."

"I can give you no more certainty, except to say that I wish to live as much as you do. If it is certainty you seek..."

Garland lifted his hand, seeing the anguish in Saratov's face. "Test authorized. Give the crew the standard warning."

"Captain." A voice, unfamiliar and urgent, compelled Garland to turn around.

There, in the entrance to the command center, stood a slender woman with fierce black eyes in the uniform of a security officer, one shoulder torn to reveal bare skin underneath. Her hands were

bound behind her. To her rear stood a tall, angular man, an engineer under Saratov's command. In his hand he held a shredder pistol, leveled at the woman's back.

"Here she is, sir, captured in Bay Three. As I mentioned, she wanted to see you anyway."

"From Santiago..." said Garland quietly, watching the woman's dark feral eyes.

Ship's Personal Logs  
Corazon Santiago

All things grow rusty with disuse. It is time to move, and advance our negotiations with the Captain.

I have before me a record of one of his interviews from Earth. "The safety of my crew is my primary concern," he says. So far every action has confirmed this statement. His predictability will become his greatest liability.

## Episode 17

Corazon Santiago launched into a roll, crossing the narrow metal hallway in the blink of a photosynth eye. She came up to her feet, lightweight rubber soles gripping the floor, maintaining her catlike balance. She looked through optical tinted goggles, flicking her eyes around to get all the scan modes: regular, heat, ultraviolet, motion trail.

Nothing.

She gripped her plastic shredder pistol and with the other hand used a tiny device to send out trails of color-coded mist that only her companions could see, looking through their frequency-coded goggles. *This way, all silent.* She felt the urge to smile and suppressed it.

Several paces behind her, and also in adjoining hallways, her small force of commandos moved, heading for the rendezvous...

The metallic concussion of untrained footsteps echoed down the hall and sent her exploding to the nearby ventilation duct. She had the duct off with four movements as silent and quick as a single breath, and then she was inside, pulling the duct cover after her. No time to replace it...

The footsteps approached, and she watched as a faint shadow stretched down the hallway under the even lights of the maintenance hallway. One of Saratov's engineers, by his stiff bearing and the awkward way his hand floated around the pistol at his belt. She had already sent a silent signal to Leuschen, behind her, so that he would take cover in the...

"Hey!" A gruff yell, startled and with an Irish brogue underlying it. The engineer had seen something. The footsteps became a run.

"Stand down, gearhead," cut in Leuschen's voice. She could hear contempt for the untrained engineer underneath. Santiago watched as the engineer's form suddenly flashed past the opening of the vent duct, and she got the quick impression of a clublike hand holding a

shredder pistol, a face red with exertion, an unusually squat torso.

"Step out, you mutinous bastard," the man bellowed.

"Raise your weapon and you will..." came Leuschen's voice, cut off suddenly by the staccato burst of shredder fire, screaming against the metal walls of the hallway, and then a second longer burst in an uneven rhythm. Santiago tightened her grip on her weapon. *Who fired?*

An answering volley, a quick low hum cut off with an elegant flourish. Precision; that was one of her people. She emerged from the vent duct, flowing out like a shadow.

The engineer lay against the wall at an odd angle, his left leg and hip joint gone. Santiago shook her head angrily; the man was still breathing, his breaths coming in strange wet gasps as he tried to pull himself up on one arm. Leuschen moved carefully, his lips twisted, staying out of the way of the man's weapon, which he still held loosely in his left hand.

"Leuschen!" her hiss shot down the hallway and he looked up, dismayed.

"One shot. You must learn to control yourself. A thousand shredder bullets and this man still lives." She glanced over him with a practiced eye. "He can not be saved."

She lifted her pistol and depressed the trigger in one-shot mode. There was a sharp double crack, one from the weapon, the other in the base of the engineer's skull.

She ran to him quickly, grabbed his right wrist and turned it over. There, on the screen of his wearable, a yellow light flashed.

"He may have alerted the command center."

"At least they'll know we mean business." Leuschen had backed up a bit, his shoulders twisted at an odd angle, hunching away from her. "He drew on me."

She shot him one quick look, filled with anger and contempt. "Don't

let it happen again. Hide this body and let's move on, before there are any further incidents."

She continued up the hallway toward her destination.

Ship's Personnel Logs

Mullen, R; Engineer

Patrolling Bay Two Maintenance Shafts on makeshift guard duty. All is silent, and rather dull. I am bloody tired, and I want this shift to end.

## Episode 18

"What does Santiago want?"

The Captain faced Santiago's Emissary in a small, sparse room located off of the command center. She sat at a small white table with her hands visible but not bound. The engineer who had captured her, a wiry man named Guillaume, stood behind her, shredder pistol leveled, staring at her back with a steady gaze that seemed almost personal in its anathema.

The Emissary straightened her shoulders. "I should not be here under guard. I came as a peaceful representative."

Garland shook his head. "Peace? You people have disrupted the ship, murdered other crewmembers..."

"Not murder. Combat." She flexed her fingers. "We want only to secure our position. Nothing more, nothing less."

Garland shook his head slightly. "I do not understand. What position? What justifies spilling the blood of your fellow crewmembers and reprogramming the ship's computer?"

"It is justified by our code of conduct. Your people tried to interfere with actions we considered vital to our survival. We had to meet force with force."

"Had to?" A woman's voice, low and compelling in its rhythms, cut into the conversation. Garland turned. There, in the doorway, stood Miriam, her bright blue uniform catching all the light in the room. She stood with her hand pressed into her side, where Captain Garland imagined layers of pseudoflesh were knitting her flesh back together, but her bearing remained open, alight with confidence.

"Miriam!" He smiled and turned to her, then moved forward and gripped her forearm. "Good to see you again."

"I couldn't stay in sickbay forever, Captain. I needed to lift my spirits a bit, and Pravin told me you might need my assistance."

"By all means." He gestured to the Emissary. "I have to tend to the ship in a moment, anyway. It seems Santiago wants to bargain with us."

"Indeed." Miriam moved forward, holding the Emissary's gaze, her lips curled in a slight smile. "Your commander must trust you greatly, to send you here. Do you speak for her?"

The Emissary nodded tersely. "I speak for myself, but my needs are also the Colonel's needs. Otherwise, I am here to deliver a message."

"What message?" Miriam sat down in a small curved plastic chair. The Captain waited by the door to the command centers, arms folded across his chest.

"First, that the Colonel means you no harm. We seek only to pursue our destiny on Planet's surface, alone."

"You speak of 'we.' Who are you, that you are all so tightly knit into a single pronoun?"

"We are warriors, the last and best, from a group of warriors formed on Earth."

"And who are you fighting? Us?"

"Anyone." Her lips curled in a smile. "Not you specifically. Anyone... weak. Anyone who threatens humanity's survival."

Garland spoke up: "We seek to *assure* humanity's survival. It is you who threaten it."

She looked at him but did not answer. Miriam spoke again. "So Santiago seeks a peaceful resolution? She would swear to this on her honor?" The Emissary nodded. "And when will she contact us?"

"When she feels the time is right. Soon."

"What exactly does she want?" cut in Garland again.

"Here." She extended her forearm, startling Garland until he realized that she was quicklinking to him from her portable

computer. He looked to his own console and tapped the Receive button, where a detailed list began to appear. He scanned the first few items.

"An entire landing pod? Food and supplies meant for a thousand crew, for your small group?"

"We are not so small." Garland and Miriam both looked at her, struck by her confidence. Captain Garland shook off a chill.

"I would guess only fifty or one hundred. Regardless..." he stopped short, seeing the shadows in her eyes. "There is no sense discussing this now. I will review your demands and wait for Santiago. We wish a peaceful resolution, but we can not be held hostage in our own ship."

Miriam stretched out one hand toward the Emissary. "Where is she now? Where is Santiago?"

The Emissary watched her coolly, her eyes growing wide and dark. "Anywhere she wants to be."

The door to the command center swung open and Pravin's face appeared in the doorway, lined with urgency.

"Captain, we have detected unauthorized movement near the far end of the Cryobays. Near the Greenhouse."

Ship's Personal Logs  
Colonel Santiago, transcribed by  
Emissary

This is not a Holy War, but a war just the same. Our cause, which we carry in the very cells of our physical being, is more pure than any religion or philosophy Earth ever gave us.

If you see Miriam Godwinson, you can remind her of that.

## Episode 19

"Dana. Here's a candidate." Ensign Cassiano stood over a cryocell in the darkened expanse of Cryobay Four, matching an inventory code on a portable touchscreen to the numbers stamped on the foot of the cell.

"A doctor?"

"Yes. Gayle Nambala." He used his sleeve to try and wipe some of the frost on the outside and peer down at the shadowy form inside. "32 years old, 115 pounds. Looks like she's in pretty good shape. In fact, I think I remember her...probably the best looking popsicle in this bay. "

"Really?" Dana looked up, her interest piqued. "How are her vitals?"

"As good as it gets. Should I mark her for wakeup?"

"Yes." Dana already seemed to have lost interest and was moving down the bay, into an unusually shadowy area further down. Cassiano punched a code into the small computer "tombstone" at the head of Nambala's cell, starting the wakeup process.

"Hey Dana, did you know this is my birthday?"

"Happy birthday," she said without irony. "How does it feel to be 75?"

"75? You mean because of the sleep?" He remained still for a moment, turning the concept over in his mind. "Damn, that's old."

"Here's something to make you feel better."

His quicklink bleeped and he looked down to see the image of a birthday cake on his portable screen. After a moment, an animation of a woman popped out with the words "Dr. Gayle Nambala" over her head. He smiled. "Well, well. I thought sex in the workplace went out in the late 20<sup>th</sup> centur..."

"Oh, no." Dana's voice cut into his reverie, and he looked up. She

had moved into the next section of cryocells, blocked off by a screened panel, and he could tell something was wrong. He moved quickly toward her, past the screen, and found himself in a land of the dead.

None of the lights along the wall in this section were on, and no pale blue light shown from the cryocells. "The powercord must have been severed," Dana said, and Cassiano could not read her face in shadows. She started forward and he followed her, moving through a garden of death, rows and rows of prematurely thawed cells, decaying bodies floating in slimy liquid.

"Now we know," he said quietly. "It must have happened..."

"Wait," cut in Dana. He saw her moving toward a cell that was set back in the darkness. It rested on a platform of sorts, slightly elevated above the others, and a small yellow-orange light cast strange patterns up and around it. Cassiano felt as if he were approaching a crypt, or a throne.

And if that light were working, perhaps the cell had not decompensated.

Cassiano scanned quickly through his touchpanel, looking over schematics of the bay. "No record of this cell in the datalinks. Strange, although you know how chaotic the launch was. Perhaps some info was lost from the banks."

"Why is it set away from the others?"

Cassiano shrugged. "Looks like they barely fit it in." He moved closer to it, and suddenly noticed his knuckles were white on the touchpanel.

Dana approached the cell. "The platform is a circuit wafer that controls this section. Ordinarily it would just have storage bins on top of it, but it looks like they used the space for another occupant."

Cassiano looked into the top of the cell. There was someone in there, a dark form, shadows hidden in shadows. The small computer, the "tombstone," was dark. He put his hand on the glass.

Cold. "It's functional, but it looks like the computer is non-functioning. We can't get any data. There could be brain damage, tissue damage. If he or she thawed and then refroze..."

Dana poked the tiny computer but got no response. Cassiano spoke up again. "I'll send engineering down to get it working so we can start the unfreezing process..."

"Hand me your stylus," cut in Dana. Cassiano extended it to her reflexively and Dana took it. "Now be quiet for one moment."

Dana pried the computer off of its metal input cable and examined the underside. She thrust the stylus in and twisted, then pried the back off of the computer and touched the contact on a tiny copper-based chip, then bridged the gap between the computer and the now disconnected cable.

There was a click and a burst of bubbles from inside the cryocell. Cassiano watched as the storm of bubbles roiled up, causing the form inside to jiggle and twitch. The process fascinated him, repulsed him a little.

Underneath the cryocell, the weird yellow light cast shadows around its smooth glass shape, closing around it like long fingers. Who did they hold in their grip?

"I didn't realize that might work so quickly," whispered Dana. "We'll have to notify Commander Lal." Cassiano nodded. Dana watched for a few moments more, then turned away. "Onward," she said quietly.

## Episode 20

"You admire your leader?"

Security Officer Anakkala, Yang's guard and the target of his question, clenched her jaw and kept her eyes focused forward. Yang read every part of her...the tension in her shoulders, the twitching of the finger on her shredder pistol, the slight gripping of her toes into the floor.

He flexed his wrists in the restraints Santiago's people had put on him. Anakkala jerked her head at the movement. Yang watched her...her tension was palpable. Perhaps Santiago had warned her people too strongly against him. His reputation had now become a weapon.

He raked his eyes across his guard. "I am very thirsty." He lowered his eyes and let his shoulders slump in a posture of defeat. His eyes glazed over suddenly and his mouth fell open. Anakkala watched him with the disgust of the strong for the weak.

"What's the matter with you?" she rasped through a tight throat.

He shook himself and looked up at her. "Defeat," he said. "I am in your control, and you are in Santiago's control, and the ship is in the control of forces we can not influence." As he spoke one of his eyes began to cross, slowly, and she watched it with fascination. "On Earth I had my destiny in my grasp, as you did, and you and I had a chance to change our fates. We chose this ship, and its promise."

"I am not to speak to you." Anakkala said stiffly, shaking herself away from his gaze. She began to pace.

He continued to talk, his words becoming a steady drone. "Such faith you have in Santiago, who is my subordinate." She turned to watch him again. Again his eye began to move, and she stared at it with fascination, watched it as if following a moon across a night sky. "She captivates you, so great is her charisma. You look at her and are filled with admiration, feel your own will slipping away."

Anakkala's breathing slowed. A flush came to her face and her eyes became wide, deep, blue. Her hands began to loosen, the tension draining from her shoulders.

"You wake and think of her eyes. You sleep...you sleep and believe..." Now he trailed off, but she remained as still as a waxen statue, watching him, watching everything about him. "You believe she can keep me here, but perhaps she cannot."

He lifted his hands and they parted easily, the shackles falling away. Anakkala gasped and half-lifted her weapon, but her eyes remained wide, transfixed, her motions dreamlike.

"Watch the face of your enemy." He reached up and brushed his hand across his own face, then moved forward and brushed his hand across hers. "*This is the face of your enemy.*" He stroked her face again, caressing her, his voice a whisper. "*This is the enemy you seek.*" One more time. "Now I will leave."

He turned and walked away. "Stop!" she cried, through lips thick and numb. She lifted her weapon, turned it on him, on her enemy, on the enemy she was... She felt her hands shaking as he turned back, his face impassive. The face...she turned her weapon, felt her wrist shaking as it turned back towards...*her own face...*

There was a burst, short and sharp. Yang watched impassively as Anakkala fired, transforming her face into a swirling mist of blood and tissue. He shuddered once, remembering the beauty in her deep blue eyes.

He stooped to her form and lifted the keycard from her belt. In spite of the illusions he had created for her, his hands were still bound, and he needed to get free. Now he had a means to escape, and a weapon to assist him.

He looked at her again, and felt a strange sadness wash over him.

Quicklink, Anonymous  
To: All Survivalists

Doctor Yang is no longer with us.

## Episode 21

"A stowaway? Could this even be possible?" asked Pravin Lal, receiving the news from ensigns Dana and Cassiano with concern.

"How could they stow-away? Everyone needs a cryocell," said Miriam from a small gray bench in one corner of the command center.

Lal had already called up schematics of the ship on a large touchpanel and was centering on the cryobay in question. The diagrams appeared as a complicated mishmash of lines representing cables and cross-feeds, snaking one over the next. "I can not make heads nor tails of this."

Saratov moved over and began to punch through the confusion. "Isolate and examine each part," he said. Color coded grids flashed out of existence one by one. "See here. These are technicians' notes, linked from these small star markings. Here are the earlier ones... this section was built by the Russians." He straightened a bit with pride.

"Would your Russian precision have allowed an extra cryocell into the schematic?" asked Miriam from her chair in the half-light.

Saratov glanced at her angrily. "It is not the Russians, I can tell you. Look, this was before the economic collapse of 2058. There is no Codicil."

"What is that?" asked Lal.

"A statement by the head technician. An affirmation that the scientists have done their best work, and the hope that it will serve its function well."

"You mean a blessing?" asked Miriam, smiling from her perch.

"Nothing of the sort. It is a way of asserting closure."

"We'll have to talk of prayer some time," she said, nodding at him.

"Whichever it is," said Lal. "It is not U.N procedure."

"But it is tradition," answered Saratov. "And there are no notes regarding the cryotests."

"So...they forgot these tests?"

"Not possible. There would have to be notes on the tests. All tech notes by the agent of any world government are public view, but if a private company was brought in later they would often conceal their tech notes." He tapped in a complex series of commands. "We all know how many agencies worked on this project by its completion." A final tap, and then an array of tiny yellow diamonds bloomed across the schematic. Saratov nodded.

"A private company took over after the Russian economy collapsed."

Lal reached over and tapped a diamond. A tech note opened with a scanned image of the lead engineer, a thin, pasty individual. But Saratov pointed to the company code in the lower right corner.

"Morgan Industries," he said.

Just then the exit hatch hissed open, and everyone turned to see a large African man fill the opening, his face regal, his body clothed in the folds of a black robe, and his hands bound. A security officer stood behind him, dwarfed by the man's presence.

"Nwabudike Morgan," the man said in a deep, rich voice, and lifted his hands. "I paid for part of your ship, and there is no need to bind me."

## Part 2

Saratov stood in the officer's mess, sipping hot water spiked with mild stimulants. In the command center, Lal and the others questioned Morgan, trying to determine quickly the impact his presence might have on the mission, but Saratov cared little about that. He closed his eyes as the hot liquid trickled down his throat, welcoming the respite from the stress of fixing the Unity.

The door swung open behind him. He turned to see Miriam crossing the mess to the small metal sink. He watched her splash cool water onto her face. Finally he spoke.

"Your faith and psychology will not help us repair this ship, Officer. Perhaps you should save them for the lecture halls."

"They can help," she said simply, dabbing her face with a thin white towel. "They are as vital to this mission as your technical readouts and precision instruments."

"Are they?" He laughed once. "Shall my engineers join hands and pray the ship to planetside? Can God change the atom?"

"God, and faith, can change anything. Indeed, faith is more visible to me than the atom." She lifted one hand. "Faith keeps my hands steady in these troubled times. How about yourself?"

Saratov, clutching his hands around his metal cup, looked at her angrily, trying to discern if she knew about the tremble in his hands. "I am steadied by the knowledge that your belief systems are all but extinct."

"Perhaps. Yet I see the fear in your own engineers' eyes. Men and women who have science as their religion now know they may die tomorrow. It gives a body perspective."

"Meaningless perspective. The atom exists, God does not. You fill their minds with illusions."

She looked at him carefully. "My faith exists, for the world would be a different place without it. With faith, my actions are different, my responses to the events of my life are different. With faith, I look at you with calm instead of...pity."

"Pity?" He barked a laugh. "Your experiences are all subjective."

She towed her hands dry, considering. "You kill my child. With faith to guide me I take no revenge and my heart heals, without faith I kill you, or spend my life in bitterness. Faith has altered my reality." Miriam turned to face him now, tossing the white towel on the counter between them like a gauntlet. "Show me the atom that

will do that."

"Lithium," Saratov said, and grinned like a death's head. "I could put chemicals into you that would turn your heart bitter, and destroy your faith."

"No you couldn't." Her eyes were calm, defiant.

"It is a proven fact. It is scientifically valid. You can not deny it."

This time she did not speak, but held his eyes with hers, and he became aware again of the metal cup clenched in his hands. He finally spoke again, in a near whisper. "You can not measure faith. You are atoms, and nothing more. That your configuration of atoms believes in something it calls God means nothing. Your kind, you crusaders, have set back humanity a thousand years or more."

She suddenly reached up and grabbed his hands, holding them tightly. He felt the warmth in them, and he felt the tremble in his own hands, and knew she could feel it as well. She closed her eyes.

"Your atoms betray you," she said softly, and then released him. "Every struggle you undertake is for a purpose you can not define. Put your own faith in science, because it feels safe. Rescue the ship, because you consider it a grand experiment. Live or die, it changes nothing. God is waiting for you as well as me."

"Enough," hissed Saratov, and slammed his metal cup down on the counter. "I have no time for this. Pray or don't pray, the ship will be fixed. And you will thank me for it, Psych Chaplain." He turned and left the room. Miriam watched him go, calm, and then her eyes flickered to the ceiling's white expanse.

Quicklink, Ensign Dana  
To: Pravin Lal

No confirmed record of the stowaway on board. He has emerged from the sleep in perfect health. We will send him to you now, under escort...

## Episode 22

Morgan dropped his hands and let the security escort unlock the organic restraints from his wrists. The restraints fell to the ground, already hardening into a complicated braided husk. Morgan rubbed his massive wrists and looked around the command center with an amused detachment.

"Thank you, Captain. I assure you I will not take my freedom lightly."

"Your assurances mean something, Director Morgan, but the psych screen we gave you also helps. However, we will have to confine you to quarters for the time being."

"Very well," Morgan said shortly.

"This upsets you?" Garland turned to look at him.

"I am difficult to upset, Captain. One cannot succeed in business being driven by the emotions. But, I am used to superior treatment." He shook his head, cutting off the thought. "Never mind. It is a different world here."

"Yes. You entered this different world when you boarded this ship without permission."

Morgan took a breath as if to argue the point, then abruptly smiled and lifted one massive hand. "Very well."

"Dismissed." Captain Garland turned away and scanned his touchpanel for a moment. He dialed up an exterior camera on his touchscreen and adjusted the view to his liking, then stared for a moment at the result, tracing the shape of it with his eyes. Behind him Morgan lingered, trying to catch a glimpse as his escort motioned him to the exit hatch.

"Planet," Captain Garland said, quietly. On the screen the promised land burned in a gold and blue and orange sphere, with clouds swirling in an atmosphere somewhat resembling Earth but with a

different mixture of gasses. And, of course, with stranger life forms hidden beneath the veil of clouds. He addressed Saratov without looking away from the image. "Prokhor, are you ready to re-activate the fusion drive?"

"Yes, Captain," said Prokhor, sounding somewhat subdued. "We have little choice regardless. There is no time."

Garland looked up. "But you are confident of success? You are prepared?"

"Like the United States Boy Scouts, Captain," muttered Saratov. "We can never be 100% confident, but I have no wish to die in space. My people are confident we are ready."

"Very well. I'll alert the crew."

"Perhaps, Captain...probes first?" Lal interjected quietly. "We could send off the first grouping, for initial scans of the surface."

"Yes, we could, although we are still moving almost as quickly as the probes would be. What purpose would it serve?" He looked at Pravin Lal and saw the gravity in his friend's face.

*He's not sure if we'll make it. This could be our only chance to send the probes...* The Captain nodded. "I see."

"We must, Captain," said Saratov bluntly. "If the ship does not make it, we can at least leave a record, some kind of valuable data, for any future survivors."

"I know. I concur. Launch them, now. Quickly. Then prepare to reactivate the drive."

Saratov turned away and began to tap codes into his touchscreen. "I will require your authorization to finalize launch, Captain," said Saratov, and Garland knew the Russian hated clearing scientific procedures through him. Garland tapped in an authorization code and watched a series of red lights turn yellow one by one. The initial set of planetary probes, prepping for launch.

"I will alert Deirdre Skye. She will want to know," said Garland.

"Yes," said Saratov, his voice acidic. "We begin the pollution of her virgin world."

"Her concerns are legitimate, if overstated," said the Captain.

"Quite overstated. Don't you believe so, Director Morgan?" Saratov shot the last question to Morgan, who stood framed in the exit hatch with the security escort behind him. Morgan smiled and spoke.

"Virgin territory. We only know of this planet's beauty because we have taken metals from the earth and sustenance from Earth's creatures and injected chemicals into Earth's air, raping the world we left behind, as some would have us believe. But without this process of science and industry, we would not be aware of this lovely planet at all.

"There are a billion worlds out there in the cosmos, some probably a thousand times lovelier than this one. Let our environmentalist friends meditate on those unclaimed worlds to soothe their spirits. But for this world in front of us...let us explore and enjoy it. We can not perceive beauty without altering it."

"I'm sure Officer Skye would have a different view," said Garland. "But that's for another time."

"Captain," cut in Lal, his voice tinged with urgency. "Security matrix...the Greenhouse!"

Garland quickly punched up the D7 video matrix for key security points. A flashing alert on camera 117B. Five figures, creeping through the shadows outside the Greenhouse.

"Seal the hatch!" ordered the Captain.

## **Part 2**

In the Greenhouse, Deirdre heard the two-beat warning siren and the hiss of the metal hatchway as it began to close.

"They are sealing the hatch!" she shouted, dropping a set of

pneumatic clipping shears to the ground and rising to her feet. "Move inside everyone, quickly!" A flurry of movement, and then the great metal door slammed shut with a sound like thunder.

Deirdre rushed out to find a group of people standing in a stunned semicircle around the entrance hatch. Sylvia caught her eyes first, her slender body a study in frozen shock.

"Sylvia, are you OK? They must have sealed it from command..."

"Indeed," said an unfamiliar voice, cold and elegant with a Spanish accent beneath. "And I hope you have the code to unseal it, Officer."

There, in front of the great door, stood a woman in the red jumpsuit of a security officer, but with one shoulder deliberately torn off to reveal the flesh underneath. She was compact but held herself with a regal bearing; her hair was jet black, pulled behind her in a tight braid, adding to the severe lines of a face both flawless and empty of compassion. Black eyes flared at Deirdre; a shredder pistol was leveled in her direction. Next to the woman stood a short man with a shaved head, the same jumpsuit with the ripped shoulder, the same kind of pistol, the same look of anger blended with impassiveness.

There were two of them, no more. As they approached, Deirdre could see that their ripped uniforms revealed a tattoo, newly administered from the look of it; an arrow in a hexagon, pointing downwards, burned in by a laser drill, perhaps.

"I am Colonel Santiago," said the woman, and then she smiled. "I hope you know how to open that door."

Deirdre held her ground, watched wide-eyed as the woman moved forward like a mongoose moving on a snake. Deirdre tried to read the woman's face; she moved cautiously but without fear, with no action unconsidered. Deirdre lifted her hand smoothly to punch in a link to her Captain.

"Captain, it is Officer Skye. I have two of the insurgents," she saw Santiago tense at the word, "inside the Greenhouse. One is Santiago. Please advise."

Santiago watched her, and then smiled.

Personal Log  
R Junack, Ship Security

We have become separated from Santiago, but we do not fear for her safety, as I am sure she does not fear for ours.

Our chain of command is firm. Were any of us to die, another is set to take their place, all the way down to the last member. That is what she taught us.

## Episode 23

"Captain, it is Officer Skye. I have two of the insurgents inside the Greenhouse. One is Santiago. Please advise."

Deirdre's voice, coming over the emergency band, startled Garland. A moment later the hatch to the command center opened, revealing a figure that stopped all activity in the room for a moment.

"Dr. Yang," he said as Sheng-ji Yang stepped into the light of the command center. "I'd ask where you've been, but we have a situation here. Listen carefully."

Captain Garland opened the reply channel as Yang crossed to him in a heartbeat. "Deirdre, acknowledge. Are you in danger? Is Santiago within earshot?"

"I am within earshot and she could be in great danger, Captain," Santiago answered. "Your botanists don't appear ready to hold off an armed force." Her voice was cold and clear, almost bracing. "I would like it very much if you unsealed this door."

"Difficult to do," said Garland calmly. Yang nodded, approving of the deceit. "We have ordered the door sealed under duress. It will take some time to de-encrypt the access code."

"I don't believe you. Regardless, I suggest you find a way to open this door. I have members of your crew under guard."

"Why, Santiago?" Yang's voice, clear and soft, floated into the room like a wisp of smoke. A silence followed, then finally...

"Dr. Yang."

"Yes. Your bargaining chip."

"You were never a bargaining chip. More of a worthy opponent, a threat I took seriously." Yang's face remained impassive, calculating. "But I am sorry to see you have escaped. You could have been one of us."

"One of whom?"

"One of those who believe humanity will continue on its path to destruction unless guided by people with discipline and an unshakable will to survive. One who believes drastic measures must be taken to ensure the survival of the human race."

"That's enough," cut in Garland. "Santiago, can we bring you here to the command center so that we can talk further? We all seek a safe ending to this journey."

"Open the door and I will come to you."

"Give your weapons to Officer Skye and I will open the door."

"I can't." Her words, simple and direct, struck Garland somehow. *Her path is so clear, to her, he realized. She has formed her strategy, and knows that the die has been cast.*

"Open the hatch, Captain. I don't want this to go any farther. You have my word on that."

"The word of a traitor," hissed Yang, his anger breaking forth for the first time.

"Perhaps a traitor to you, but I only seek to guarantee the safety of those who follow me. If the entire ship doesn't make it, and I believe it won't..." Garland glanced at Saratov, who sat hunched over his console, preoccupied, "...we, who have proven our will to live, want to be in the part of the ship that reaches planetside."

"Wait by the hatch," Garland said, and closed the connection. He looked around the command center...at Yang, whose eyes pierced the comm link darkly, at Saratov, who now turned, his face pale, his chin steady.

"Skye is in danger. We need to open that hatch, and we don't have much time. I want options, quickly."

"You are the Captain," said Yang.

"Then move to your station, Dr, Yang, and share your expertise. You

saw Santiago firsthand...what is the situation?"

"Yes, what's her damage?" interjected Miriam softly.

Dr. Yang, ignoring her, moved to the oval table in the center of the bay and sat down in one fluid motion. He picked up a stylus and began tracing on the tabletop, which automatically activated and recorded his movements.

"Santiago is disciplined and has firm control over her followers. They are all armed."

As if on cue, a comm light flashed. All eyes turned to the Captain, who in turn looked at Dr. Yang. "Dr. Yang, our choices. Quickly."

"Unseal the door and let Santiago control the Greenhouse as well as the cryobay she has now, then negotiate."

"Could we surrender to her a storage bay, and give her and her people safe transit to Planet?" asked Lal.

"Only if it were sealed from her side. She wants a fortress, safety," said Yang.

"But she values honor," said Garland. "We could promise her safety, give her our word."

Yang smiled grimly. "Perhaps. Choice two...send out a strike team, neutralize her people, do it quickly and we may save Skye and the botanists."

"And who will run this strike?" asked Saratov. "My people are armed but not trained. We need them..."

"There are a few security staff awakened," said Garland. "Any more would take days to emerge from the sleep into full effectiveness."

"Too long," said Yang. "But there is always choice three....leave the Greenhouse sealed and cut off its oxygen. With Santiago dead her people will lose heart."

"Skye and the rest will die as well!" flared Miriam, and her

magnetism pulled at Garland...her intensity.

"You asked for choices...that is a choice. And it is the only one that will guarantee Santiago is neutralized."

"What if we waited until they fell unconscious and then rushed in?" asked Lal, always seeking the balanced path.

"The security matrix shows that Santiago's people wait outside the Greenhouse. Plus the timing would need to be perfect, and Skye will probably fall before Santiago. We must be firm...give her what she wants, attack her, or cut off the air. That is all I see."

"Captain," said Saratov urgently. "I have gotten the signal from engineering. We are ready to restart the fusion drive. We can't wait."

"Then do it," said Garland. "I'll tell Santiago we can't open the door now."

"Wait," said Yang, stopping Garland with his intensity. "Do not contact her. I see an opportunity."

Personal Log  
Pravin Lal, Chief of Surgery

It is the place of a physician to see death as well as life, and in seeing the two, constantly intertwined, it is easy to stop caring when life transitions into death.

We face a difficult decision here. Lives are at stake, and perhaps not all of them can be saved. It is times like this I envy Godwinson's unshakable faith.

## Episode 24

Santiago sat lightly, one leg hooked over a green storage box, but she watched Deirdre with eyes as sharp as blades. One hand rested on her thigh, and in that hand the shredder pistol shifted back and forth in a rhythm only Santiago could hear. Deirdre stood quietly, positioning herself at the front of her small group of staff, trying to hold Santiago's gaze.

Abruptly a metallic shunting sound split the silence of the chamber. Red lights began to pulse around the perimeter of the Greenhouse. Heedless of the threat from the insurgents, one of Deirdre's botanists, a mature brunette named Tara, crossed to a nearby terminal. Santiago had not moved, but her posture was wired with tension, and there was a curl to her lips.

"What's happening?" she snapped at Tara. The woman directed her answer towards Deirdre instead.

"The oxygen supply has been cut off to this room, and the seal, of course, is airtight. It appears they are actually draining oxygen from the room. We have...ten minutes at most, before we become impaired. Unconsciousness and death will follow..."

Santiago slid off the box and onto her feet. She punched a code into her quicklink. "Junack, this is Santiago. Move your people away from the door and watch for any activity. Set guards..." She abruptly trailed off, her eyes snapping to Deirdre, whose eyes had flickered, just for a moment, to the screen on her wearable computer.

Santiago closed the distance between them in an instant, grabbing for Deirdre's arm. Deirdre slid back with surprising speed, avoiding the grab.

"What was that?" Santiago demanded.

"Nothing," said Deirdre. "The homeostasis is off because of the oxygen...the Greenhouse computers are sending me their alarms."

"Show me." Her tone remained imperious. Deirdre extended her arm and tapped a scroll code into the tiny flat screen.

"Meaningless," said Santiago, thoughtfully. The screen contained flashing codes representing chemical atmospheric balances. "Do you have any oxygen in here? Where is your emergency supply?"

"Beneath that support beam..." Deirdre motioned to an arc on the far side of the Greenhouse. "Unless they've somehow been sealed from us as well."

"You," Santiago pointed to Tara. "Check the panels. Verify there is no oxygen." Back to Deirdre again. "Think quickly, Officer. There are chemicals here...can you manufacture oxygen somehow?"

"I...don't think so," Deirdre considered. *This woman is extremely intelligent*, she realized. *Carefully...* "Let me check the supplies. We might be able to..."

"Check quickly. Kurn, watch her," Santiago motioned to her companion, the shorter bald man, who followed Deirdre as she headed for a stack of storage canisters behind a small stand of olive trees. As they moved off Santiago activated a link to the command center, emergency band. "Captain Garland, this is Santiago. I find your actions indefensible. Don't you fear for your crew, under guard here?" She looked at the quicklink angrily. "They are not listening."

And then she looked up. Like trees bending under a forest wind, all of Deirdre's people had bent to their quicklinks at the same moment, reading a message. At once they all began to fall, throwing themselves onto the ground.

Santiago sprung back, instinctively seeking shelter by the wall.

## Part 2

"Opening the fueling channel," said Saratov. "Priming the reactor. It will be but a few moments. I am triggering three bursts as a test." A high pitched hum, just at the outer edge of consciousness, tickled Garland's ear. He looked around. Everyone looked preoccupied, parsing the unusual sound. Saratov seemed calm, alert. Yang spoke

urgently into his quicklink.

Abruptly, a burst of sound split the air, and the ship surged beneath them, throwing Garland to the floor. He felt, and heard, the screams of metal, as the world of the Unity shook to its core.

### Part 3

The ship surged and rocked beneath Santiago's feet. She rolled as if cresting a wave, her balance spinning her catlike as the floor shuddered beneath her. Deirdre's staff, already in mid fall, covered their heads and rolled, tumbling into one another. Deirdre fell forward into a stack of plastic cylinders containing fertilizers and chemicals, then immediately twisted around as Kurn fell forward into her.

She slid her fingernails under the release valve of one canister and ripped it off. A stream of liquid nitrate rolled forth, pouring across Kurn's face. He screamed, more from surprise than pain.

Deirdre rolled away. The trees around her rocked and swayed, their branches scraping the sky like scarecrows in a tempest. As she watched a web of cracks bloomed across one of the glass panels above, like horizontal lightning.

*Oh God...the ship...*

A metallic groan traveled down the length of the ship and through her feet. Outside the panels she caught a wild sight of landing pods shaking, more structural supports bending.

There was a *pock pock pock* and three holes appeared near her feet. She looked up, her heart pounding in alarm...

Santiago's second. The little Kurn. He had one hand clutching his own face, his own eyes, as the other hand swung wildly, sending shredder pellets in crazy arcs around the Greenhouse.

"Skye!"

Deirdre looked to see Tara, holding one of the tension rigs the

engineers had used to shore up the synthglass panels. She lunged forward across the wildly tilting terrain and aimed the contraption in Kurn's direction.

She pulled the trigger.

Out of the front of the rig shot a clear shimmering transparent sheet, about three meters square, rippling in the light. The sheet should have been fired into a synthglass panel, where it would have spread out to grip the surface with high levels of tension, reinforcing it.

Instead it now slapped into the lunging Spartan, wrapping around him. Tara flipped a switch on the gun, triggering a signal pulse along a slim optical fiber. The Spartan's eyes grew wide and he opened his mouth to scream as the tension sheet pulled tight around him, tearing layers from his skin in different directions. She saw his eyes widen in horror and his skin rip as the clear sheet tightened around his body. His scream sounded faint, as if heard through walls.

The ship steadied. The floor became firm again. Deirdre Skye stood slowly. Leaves scattered across the metal floor of the Greenhouse, and a dark stream of water, spilled from a hydration tank, snaked around her.

"Is everyone all right? Tara? Nhoj?" She looked around. "Where is Santiago?"

"Here," said a voice, husky with fear. Deirdre looked over.

Nhoj kneeled near Santiago, who lay splayed out against a compost bin near one wall of the Greenhouse. Santiago's eyes were closed, her face a serene mask. Deirdre watched her for a moment, imagining the powerful heart that still beat in the woman's chest. That deep passion for survival at all costs, so similar to and yet so unlike Deirdre's quiet passions...

Nhoj delicately pulled the shredder pistol from Santiago's fingers. "She's unconscious. Was that the plan?"

Nhoj looked so puzzled. Deirdre smiled in spite of herself, and then began to laugh, releasing tension. "Tie her up, quickly, with anything you can find. I'll contact the Captain. It looks like we have Santiago."

Quicklink to Captain Garland.

Send security detail to the Greenhouse immediately. Release the exit hatch as well...we need all the oxygen we can get.

## Episode 25

Morgan tapped his queen and shifted it to the fifth rank. Imran Siddiqui, watching from the other side of the small holotable in Morgan's holding cell, arched an eyebrow. The holographic pieces suddenly flickered and then slowly wavered back into existence.

"I thought you played a defensive game," Imran muttered.

Morgan smiled. "Making you think that is the best defense I have."

"Mmmph." Imran tapped the board twice and a bishop that resembled a Lara Croft figure slid forward to threaten one of Morgan's knights. The bishop suddenly wavered and flickered again, jittering frantically.

"Is it going to vanish?" Imran asked, concerned.

"It might. I can not stand these cheap holos. Real pieces are much more elegant."

"Yes, and they stay where you put them." Imran looked at his piece with anguish. "It must be the heat. It's so damn hot in here." He began fanning the piece madly. "These boards are too delicate."

The bishop flickered back on. Morgan considered for a moment, and then advanced the knight forward to the sixth rank, deep in Imran's territory. "In truth, the room is hot because I have a chill I can not shake, ever since awakening. Check."

"Maybe you should see a doctor." Imran moved his head down to the level of the board, as if a new perspective could give him inspiration. "I think you split my rook." He moved his king grudgingly.

"Yes. Doctor Nambala knows me. If you would send for her I would be grateful." Morgan considered the board for a moment. "Your rook actually does not concern me at the moment." He tapped his queen and sacrificed it for the rook pawn.

"You want a doctor now?" Imran studied the board carefully.

"Yes. I am somewhat concerned. Our health is our greatest treasure."

Imran laughed. "Funny, coming from you. I hear you had a lot of 'treasure' back on Earth...mansions, land, women."

"Yes. I had all those things. And before you ask, it was everything you could imagine." Morgan grinned.

Imran nodded and let one hand hover over his king, reluctant to accept the sacrificed queen. "Tell me more."

"Will you call my doctor?"

"I should call any available doctor. You are a prisoner, after all."

"A prisoner? Is that what they told you?"

"Well...under escort. The U.N. doesn't like to ruffle any feathers. I'm just supposed to check on you once every couple of hours."

"I see." Morgan regarded the board. "You know, you could have those things you dream of...wealth, security, power."

"Wouldn't that be something," Imran said dryly. "Business is not my forte, though. I'm just a technician assigned to emergency security duty until they get this mess straightened out."

"No, no, that is not the way to think. Business is simply the exchange of value. You just have to learn to play the game."

"If I could play that game I wouldn't be a technician. I'd be mogul of some kind, back on Earth still. Dead by now, actually, now that I think of it."

Morgan shook his head. "Negative thinking. It's all a game, a trading of one thing for another. But, like chess, you calculate your exchanges so that in the end you are in a position to take the prize."

Imran nodded. "Yes. I could see that." He sighed and leaned back, tapping the resignation code into the holotable. Morgan immediately activated the replay mode, watching as the board reset

and repeated every move in the game at an accelerated clip. As he watched he spoke.

"Don't fool yourself. Don't convince yourself that power, wealth and pleasure mean nothing to you because you are an academician. The need for power is fundamental."

Imran watched the game unfold. "Maybe. What about the need to make a difference, or raise a family? Those can be more important than power."

Morgan arched an eyebrow. "And did you have a family? On Earth?"

Imran hesitated. "No, I did not have a family."

"I did," Morgan said. Imran looked up, surprised. "I had a lovely wife. And I saw all the holovid shows, the romances...even in these terrible times, we only need each other.' But that was never true, that we only need each other."

Morgan paused, clearing his throat. "With my wealth, I could protect her. I could give her a security that those without power, without money, lacked. You want to dream your big ideas, create your scientific projects, but your time is not your own. Don't you want to be the one with the power, holding the purse strings? Deciding your destiny?"

"Yes. Of course." Imran thought for a moment. "What happened to your wife?"

"Even power has limits. Radiation sickness. But she spent her last days in a room fit for a dying queen, with the best care." The replay wound down. "Will you call my doctor?"

"Will you make it worth my while?" Imran grinned.

"You're learning! As a matter of fact I can. We are still humans on this ship, and where there are humans there is human nature. What do you want? Back on the tech shift?"

Imran jerked his head up. "Yes."

"I will see. But I will miss our talks during your patrol. Be sure to come by and play some chess."

"You can get me back on tech?" Imran's hope was palpable.

"Yes, most likely. But you must remember the favor. And when Gayle comes you must leave us for a time."

"Gayle?"

"Dr. Nambala. I believe she can help us."

Unity Log File

Holoboard 0623 requesting program

Accessing program: CHESS

Security check on holoboard passed.

Ensign Siddiqui approved.

Commence game.

## Episode 26

[Note: Saratov's name is now Zakharov, reflecting feedback from Russian fans on Saratov being an unrealistic name. And now, back to our story...]

"The ship is falling apart."

Zakharov's words blanketed the command center, shadowing the faces of the assembled staff. "We are not far from Planet, but the stress on the Unity's structure is reaching critical levels."

"Implication?" asked Garland tersely.

"We should prepare for the worst. The whole structure may shake apart before one of us touches the new world."

"We've come all this way," said Miriam. "Why now?"

"Physics," retorted Zakharov.

"Perhaps it is better this way," murmured Deirdre, present in the command center to debrief after Santiago's capture. The Captain ignored her, if he heard her at all.

"Should we break away now?" he asked, rising to his feet. "Are we close enough to pilot down the landing pods.?"

"Too soon," said Zakharov. "But we should begin our preparations. Awaken everyone, move people to their destination pods, redistribute supplies. Accept that only one pod, or none, may make planetfall."

"Or all of them? Is that even a possibility?" asked Lal.

"Yes, of course," said Zakharov, his voice neutral.

"Captain, we have assembled a report from the first wave of landing pods," broke in Ensign Cotter, the ensign on duty.

"Excellent," said Captain Garland. Behind him Deirdre tensed. "Send

the next wave. Seed the surface...we don't know who will need them or when."

"Captain," said Deirdre, rising to her feet. "I must object to this. Are we now interstellar litterbugs...is this our welcome to Planet?"

"This is not the time," he said simply, coldly. Deirdre took another breath but saw anger in Garland's eyes, and she suddenly could smell a new sense of desperation in the command center. Now the mission was about survival, not philosophy...

"Very well," she said, and headed for the observation bay.

## Part 2

Deirdre Skye stood in the observation room off of the command center and watched the great jewel of Planet pulse against the darkness. Alpha Centauri A, the system's primary star, backlit Planet beautifully now, creating a halo around it, and Alpha Centauri B, the system's second of three suns, cast another quality of light across the surface.

She stared, mesmerized, at the new world. Without thinking she lifted one hand to touch the thick synthglass of the observation windows, brushing her fingers slowly along it. Its beauty...the swirls of colors...clouds, not unlike Earth clouds, and the jagged shape of land beneath, peeking out here and there.

Behind her the door hissed open, but she did not look up. She was tired of talking to the Captain about Santiago and what had happened in the Greenhouse. She was tired of the worry creasing people's faces...would the ship make it? Even now she could feel it shaking beneath her feet, shaking as if it would not hold together long.

"Each sight more beautiful than the last," came a rich baritone behind her. She snapped around quickly...Morgan, the stowaway, stood in the doorway, staring at her and the shimmer of Planet behind her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked tersely. "You should be under

guard."

He chuckled as if at a good joke. "Not now. Some crewmembers have interceded on my behalf, and the Captain has called me to consult about the ship. I know things that could prove useful, during this time of crisis." He nodded at Planet. "So that is the new world, my lady?"

"Officer Skye, please" she said absently, turning away from him, inexplicably drawn to the sight of Planet again. "It is beautiful, yes?"

"As beautiful as my finest diamonds." He stepped forward and lifted one hand, sweeping it expansively across the vista. "It is like a... coin, catching the light on a field of black velvet."

Her eyes flickered to him. "It is what Earth used to be. Not for hundreds of thousands of years have Earth people been privileged with what we are seeing today. A world unspoiled."

"A world rich with promise." He said, lifting his chin.

"No." The word came out clipped and she bit her lip.

He looked over at her, smiling in puzzlement. "You do not find promise here?" But his eyes searched her face rapidly. "It is your new world, a perfect world for your experiments. You have seen the preliminary scans...rich in nitrate, perfect for your hybrids."

"Yes, I know. I meant.... Your goals are transparently obvious." One of his eyebrows shot up. "You see a world of natural resources, ready to be...exploited. Correct?"

"Exploit." He turned the word over, considering it as if tasting a new wine. He looked at her appraisingly. "I wondered who would first use that word. We all...all life forms exploit, Officer. Your plants exploit the very air we exhale. We exploit them for food. But even the simplest of your hybrids would gladly kill us if they could, to stop from being torn from the earth and consumed."

"Perhaps. But there is a balance. I do not have to tell you something so patently obvious. We did not come to 'exploit.'"

"Didn't we? Sustained growth is a form of balance, and an inevitable one. The economic Holy Grail."

"Your wealth means nothing here."

"Wealth is the exchange of value. It is a way of representing energy traded. I don't need to tell you this." He chuckled. "We will get along well on this new world, I can see. I will be sure to sell you the tie-dyes."

"You seem to think your place in this world is preordained." She turned toward him, feeling the heat of the Centauri suns on the side of her face.

"No, not at all. But I am here. I am a leader, and a manager. I'm sure Captain Garland can appreciate using any available talents to the fullest on this harsh new world."

She shook her head. "It is a beautiful world. Why can't you just appreciate its beauty?"

"I can. I appreciate things of beauty. They are of high value. Planet...I value it, or I would not be here."

"But your kind of thinking will destroy it," she shot back. He laughed at that, and she grew angry. "Why do you laugh like this?"

"I see now your famous intensity, tending your hybrids night and day. I imagine you making a new breed of plants, one that can defend itself readily...the Lady Skye and her flame-throwing corn stalks, advancing on my trader's outpost." He chuckled again. "We need traders, Lady. How else to turn worms into silk?"

"Adam and Eve needed nothing, except their garden."

"Now you sound like Godwinson," Morgan said quietly. He let out a deep breath and turned to leave, then stopped. "Perhaps humankind will taint Planet, or perhaps we have all learned something of value from Earth's tragedy. But Lady," he said, and she turned to look at him with a flicker of annoyance. "If you wanted Planet to remain truly pure, you would not have come at all."

Ship's Computer,  
Status Report

Pods seeded.

Returning preliminary data,  
Planetside.

## Episode 27

Prokhor Zakharov left the accessway and entered Bay Three, which he considered his home. In fact, he had insisted on leaving his quarters here, rather than sleep closer to the command center, and Captain Garland had not argued. Indeed had no reason to argue; if spending down time among his engineers helped him to repair the ship more quickly, there could be no objections.

He entered the main recreation bay. Almost empty; a couple of his scientists, haggard from lack of sleep, played holodarts at one end. Most people worked on the ship or slept all day long; many were taking performance-enhancing drugs that allowed them to stay awake for hours but then crashed them into a deep sleep.

He crossed into the sleeping quarters, where cryocells were now lined with moldable foam and turned into beds. Most of the cells were empty but a few fitful bodies slumbered here and there. He saw a few of the other non-science Bay Three personnel as well--security and doctors, mostly, their faces calmer in sleep than the stressed engineers.

He altered his course to pass by a certain cryocell--ah.

"Raymond." His friend was awake, staring hollowly at the low dark roof of the sleeping bay. He refocused on Zakharov slowly.

"Officer." He sat up quickly. "Is everything well?"

"Yes." He let the word trail off. With the ship disintegrating around them 'well' was a relative term. "I am going to have some tea before I retire, if you would be so kind as to join me."

"Certainly, Officer. Sleep is not coming quickly tonight."

Zakharov walked to the back corner of the bay where partitions had created a cramped space for his quarters. A small white metal table and two chairs sat next to the cryocell he used for a bed. On a small ledge rested a red plastic pitcher and a rod he used as a heating element.

"Sit," he waved at the table. Raymond ran his hands through his white hair and sat down gingerly. The man was about as old as Zakharov, and the two had been friends for years.

Zakharov dipped the heating element into the pitcher and dropped in two small tea capsules. He punched the Play button on a small speaker unit and dialed up a selection. Bach began to play, the melody wafting softly around him. Zakharov closed his eyes.

"In times of hardship, this is the music I play. I imagine myself, riding the waves of sound into a better, calmer place." He broke off abruptly.

Raymond nodded. "It is good music. Sublime. Now please sit down. You know I will remain on my feet as long as you do."

Zakharov poured the tea into a small cup and handed it to him. The two sat down and remained in silence for a moment, listening to the music.

"Do you think we'll make it?" Raymond's voice jarred Zakharov from his reverie. He sipped the tea before answering.

"Humankind astounds me with its...with *our* versatility and knowledge. We know so much...we can tweak atoms, we know the result of almost any action we take. We do this...that happens."

"Yes," said Raymond. He had become close friends with Zakharov by knowing when to just listen.

"But that is in the lab. It is controlled. Here...there is too much going on. If the Unity were a lab, and you or I had complete control...of course we could repair it. But there are too many people on board, and too many unknowns. Human motivations are still too complex. They are the last frontier of science, but the human mind itself rebels against scientific control, and perversely turns against it, even when destruction is the result."

"This ship is the perfect example. We are riding the back of chaos." He nodded and took a sip of tea. "So many minds went into the building of this ship. It is disorganized, haphazard, like so much of

what humanity does."

"Impure," said Raymond quietly.

"Yes. Impure. The motives...not science or exploration, but a variety of things. This country worked on the Unity to give hope to its people, that country to experiment with U.N. money, that one because the leader wanted to stay in power. If we make it to Planet, I want things to be different."

"How?"

"I want to be guided by scientific truth. I believe we will all be happiest following the ways of science. The crew must see this."

Raymond nodded in agreement. "Many do. The ship is full of thinkers, people who respect the life of the mind and want to be far from politics. Many respect your focus. I have even heard Doctor Yang talk of a controlled society, similar to what you speak of."

"Mmph. I speak of a society where scientific truths drive humanity forward, not Yang's contrived Utopia."

"Still, he could be an ally. Deirdre's people just spend most of their time in the Greenhouse, naturally." Raymond smiled at his unwitting joke.

"Well, keep tabs, Raymond. We want the purest minds on the ship, pure as the clearest vodka. Which, as I speak of it..." He set down his tea and pulled from a small drawer an unlabelled bottle full of clear liquid. His face lit up, and Raymond's eyes widened a bit.

"You would open that now? There is nothing to celebrate."

"Why not now? If the ship does not make it, I want to enjoy this. No sense vaporizing good vodka." He poured in a small amount into two more cups.

"Is your confidence that low?"

"It is high. But this will bolster it further." He threw back the drink and his eyes glowed with pleasure for a moment. "Besides, I will

save a last drink for Planetside."

"The last bottle ever made. Think of it." Raymond stared into the cup as if hypnotized. Zakharov reached out and poked him in the shoulder.

"We will make more! We will recreate Earth on Planet., but with a new purity of focus, on science. It is like the greatest research grant in history...an entire planet!"

"Still, it will not be Earth vodka. This is the last. A sobering thought."

Zakharov laughed quietly. "Ironic that it would sober you. Drink," he urged. Raymond sipped, which was not usually his way, but he wanted to savor the drink as if it were nectar. Zakharov watched him.

"Don't think too much on Earth, Raymond. It is too painful. You have a soft side, but it is not always best to indulge it. If we think of Earth, and all that is lost, our spirits will whither. We must think on the new world ahead, and the new knowledge that can be gained."

"I know."

"We have the purity of focus. Let's keep our people looking forward, studying, learning. It is a buffer against melancholy, and moves us toward a higher purpose."

"Yes," said Raymond, and sipped the vodka, feeling its heat wash over him.

"The ship will be fixed." Zakharov said it suddenly, as if in response to a question that had floated up to the front of his consciousness. "We have the skills to do it."

"Yes." Raymond lifted his cup, and they thunked them together and downed the crystalline spirits.

Ship's Journal,  
Prokhor Zakharov recording

"Earth is the cradle of the mind. But one can not stay in the cradle forever."

Konstantin Tsiolkovsky,  
The Father of Rocketry.  
From the Datalinks.

## Episode 28

"And as you feel them pull away from you...push! So." Sheng-ji tensed his arms and torso in a quick pulse and sent the burly ensign a good two meters. The ensign windmilled for a moment and then caught his feet, grinning in perverse pleasure. The crew gathered around them burst into a smattering of good-natured applause.

"How long until you learn how to do that?" asked one earnest young crewmember.

"I already know how to do that," said Yang calmly.

"No," said the crewmember. "I mean us. How long until *we* learn to do that?"

"You must practice for ten thousand hours, and then practice ten thousand more. And make sure every move is correct. Or, perhaps fight in zero-g."

Another ensign, with thick dark brows and an urgent demeanor, waved a touchstylus. "Say, how *do* you fight in zero-g? Can your techniques be extrapolated to a zero-g environment?"

"Zero-g is like fighting on the ground, but you can fall in any direction," Sheng-ji answered lightly, and then picked up a towel and began padding his neck and arms. "Session over. Practice the coiling motion for next time. Ten thousand hours." They laughed politely and started to break up, talking among themselves.

Sheng-ji moved away, trying to avoid more of the barrage of questions from curious students. He began coming to Bay Four more often, ever since Santiago had turned against him. The crew in Bay Four seemed a little adrift, and there was an unusually large contingent of curious bright-eyed seekers of...whatever Earth, and the Charter, had failed to offer them. He watched them all with razor sharpness, although most of them...

*Children, really. No discipline, no tolerance for discomfort. They do not know how to 'eat bitter.' Still...*

He headed for his makeshift quarters. Still, their almost fawning worship of his teaching did stir a part of his ego he enjoyed. And, more importantly, they gave him an additional power base, a section of crew he could remake in his own image.

He opened a floor hatch and descended into the cramped lower sleeping quarters. Most of the crew now slept in their cryocells, remade with foam padding into coffin-like beds. Yang himself had a private quarters with a small desk and room to meditate. His intended quarters were closer to the command, but he had commandeered these new quarters from a Bay Four Resident Officer.

Officer Rang was his name, and he had not survived the cryosleep. Unfortunate...

## Part 2

Deirdre Skye felt the gravity of the Unity lessen, just slightly, and could see the lights of the ship dim down its length. "Nightfall," she murmured, referring to a mode the ship moved into at regular intervals to help maintain the crew's circadian rhythms.

She stretched and stared out the tinted panels of the Greenhouse. She felt languid, mesmerized by the startling beauty of Planet, its breathtaking presence against the lonely infinite. They were so close now, and Planet seemed to sparkle with mystery, calling to her. She had to pull her eyes away as they grew heavy with the need for sleep.

"Tara, I am retiring for now," she alerted her second in command, and walked back through her gardens and tiny forests, her green worlds, toward a series of light partitions she had set up next to a grouping of white pine.

She passed by a small white bunk where Tara, loyal Tara, now slept, her presence reassuring to Deirdre, and then went behind the shaded partitions. She pulled off her uniform and let it fall, feeling the patterns of warmth and coolness in the Greenhouse. She smelled the tingly, refreshing scent of the pine and kneeled next to their

bins, pushing her hands into the soil which was dry and sandy, but still better than the metal and plastic that made up most of the Unity.

Her eyes crossed the bright sphere of a thermal lamp and she closed them and watched the afterimage burn against her eyelids, mirroring the bright sphere of Planet. The afterimage fragmented and wavered and then took shape again...*Planet*...and she heard a roaring in her ears, and it sounded like wind and sea, but not quite like Earth wind or Earth sea.

And somewhere beneath it all, beneath the roaring, as she reached out her pale arms and dug her fingers into the earth...a voice, harmonic and faint, but rich with age..."*earth*". And then... "*being*"

"*earthbeing*."

Her eyes snapped open. Her heart pounded in her chest, and a chill rippled across her torso.

"Deirdre." She turned. Tara stood at the partition, looking concerned. "Is everything OK here?"

Deirdre nodded and stood, brushed the dirt from her hands and moved silently to her own simple cot. She lay down and pulled a lightweight Unity blanket over her. "I'm just retiring. I am all right."

"Shall I turn off the thermal lamp there, Officer?"

"No," Deirdre said, with an edge. "Leave it."

"Very well." She heard Tara pad away.

Deirdre stared at the light and then closed her eyes again, as a planet dream took shape against the darkness of her sleep.

Ship's Personal Logs  
Deirdre Skye, Xenobiologist

The Unity was born of fire, a spark crossing the sky from a burning world, and where it lands a fire will begin.

That fire will rage on Planet...we will rage on Planet...sweeping across its peaceful vistas, until only a charred husk remains.

Unless, of course, other struggles passed here, struggles undreamed of in our human-centric universe. Unless slumbering demons of Planet's own await us, beneath its strange and alien sky.

## Episode 29

"Commander Zakharov." Doctor Yang waited as the scientist studied his console, the muscles of his back a study in disinterest.

"Commander Zakharov, please. We need your knowledge here."

He turned, and despite the stillness of his posture annoyance flared in his eyes. "Yes, Commander. What do you require of me?"

"We need an update on the Unity's status."

"You are not the Captain."

"I am the Executive Officer. While the Captain is in quarters, I ask that you register your status report so that we all know whether to cash in our 777-Cs."

Zakharov smiled. "Our retirement funds are ashes, along with the rest of Earth."

"We don't know that," said a quiet voice. Yang looked over to see Miriam, hovering at the perimeter of the command center. "We don't know it for sure."

"I believe we all can guess the fate of Earth," said Zakharov. Pravin Lal, working a medical console, turned to stare at him thoughtfully.

"Guess, perhaps," said Miriam. "But I thought you respected proof."

"I have little time for status reports or for these debates."

"True, I am sure," said Yang, "but perhaps if you give us the status report we will understand just how little time you have."

Zakharov nodded tersely. "Very well. I will give you both."

His fingers flashed on his touchpanel, and three screens flickered and reconfigured themselves into a schematic configuration. A simple diagram of a ship appeared. With a couple of taps, Zakharov made the wireframe lines as thick as crayon marks.

"As we know, the Unity was designed to make it to Planet...barely."

"Explain," said Miriam in a high clear voice. Yang turned to give her a disapproving look, but Miriam stayed focused on Zakharov. Lal, too, seemed mesmerized by the scientist's words. Zakharov continued.

"The amount of fuel it took to get us here, is astronomical. Literally!" He slammed one long bony finger into the surface of his touchpanel. "Here and here...in the huge bins on either side of the cryobays is the fuel that got us here. It is carried through delivery mechanisms into this chamber, here, where the fusion reactions take place that power the ship forward. The power from the reactions..."

"I believe we know all this," murmured Yang, but Zakharov did not stop.

"The power from the reactions is carried down this shaft through these containment rings, right through the center of the eight cryobays, and impacts here, on this plate, which absorbs the shock and propels us forward. This happens many times each second!"

He paused for effect, his eyes gleaming with thoughts of force and precision. "Over and over again a burst of energy that rivals an atomic weapon travels through the containment rings, only meters from the edge of the cryobays, and propels us forward. This went on for over six years, accelerating us in the near frictionless environment of space to a coasting speed, and then, halfway through the journey, a carefully placed retro rocket fired, and the entire Unity turned, so that its thrusters faced forward." Miriam watched him intently. Lal and Yang looked annoyed.

"Then the fusion drive fired again, again bursts like the sun, and so slowed us down for another 20 years, stopping us precisely here, at Chiron. At least that was the theory. And to pull that off! It is..."

"Amazing. Impressive," said Yang.

"It is...virtually...impossible. Do you see?"

"What do you mean?" asked Deirdre Skye, who had walked in from the observation room and now listened from a chair beneath a small round ceiling lamp.

Zakharov looked at her, caught up in the momentum of his own thoughts. "To freeze us all, leave us in these crypts, send us into space across light years, powered by our own manufactured sun...." He began pacing, cursing in Russian.

"I see," said Deirdre, and she ran one hand through her dark hair. "It is impossible. The odds that we could make it..."

"What are you saying here?" asked Miriam, eyes narrowed, reading them all carefully. "Skye, please, share your thoughts."

"You remember Earth," Deirdre said. "The wars. The chaos. The... destruction."

"I remember holding the children of my enemies, watching the hollows that used to be eyes," said Lal quietly. "Yes...the chaos."

"Governments rising and falling. Every piece of this ship was built by a new regime, practically. The launch..."

"Rushed," said Pravin suddenly. "They didn't think..."

"They didn't think we'd make it!" finished Deirdre. "It was a blind hope, a flare shot against the darkness of a night at sea. Why?"

"They started building it, why not finish?" said Yang. "Perhaps it is that simple."

"No," said Miriam. "It's more. It's hope."

Zakharov shook his head.

"Yes," persisted Deirdre. "The Earth was dying. All of us knew it. But if they...if the people of Earth could live long enough...at least long enough to see the flash of light as we shot out of orbit. Hope."

"Or the political gain of another twisted regime," said Zakharov.

"What does that matter?" asked Lal. "To the people of that regime... to see the Unity catapult itself into the night sky...and to think, in the pain, the poverty, the death and sickness all around, that perhaps, in forty years time...hope. For humanity."

"They are all dead now, for certain," cut in Zakharov. "Don't make this too maudlin."

"Most are dead one way or the other, by age or violence," said Miriam. "Humanity still survives. God certainly does."

"So they fired us off, a wild firecracker into the sky, and they hoped," said Deirdre. "Where does that leave us?"

"If we do not fix the ship, they were right," said Zakharov. "We are not making it."

"But we might," said Deirdre. "We still have the hope. We are the last. Agreed?"

"Yes," said Miriam. "Most likely, we are the last."

Deep Space Orbital Command Station :  
OFFLINE

NATO Command Crystal Palace : OFFLINE

Christian States Heavenly Sword Main  
Diocese : OFFLINE

FOX Broadcast Worldwide Main Feed :  
OFFLINE

EBS North America : CRITICAL FAULT

NBC/MS Integrated Optical Network :  
ABORT RETRY FAIL

NAOL Consumer Courtesy Warning Web :  
OFFLINE

## Episode 30

"Where is the Captain?" asked Deirdre, growing restless.

"I have sent him a wakeup," said Lal quietly. "He is timing his emergency stim use carefully. Soon there won't be very much time to sleep."

"I have just looked at Planet again," said Deirdre, and Lal could see, in her eyes, reflections of Planet's beauty mirroring out to infinity. "We are so close."

"Yes," said Zakharov sharply, and the others turned to look at him. "Very close. It is time for final preparations. We have a window to land, but it is a small one. Still, I believe we can make it." Morgan nodded; Miriam closed her eyes for a brief and silent prayer.

"Are we all clear on our duties?" asked Yang, sweeping the assembled staff with a dark gaze. "Is there anything left undone?"

"Our duties are to follow the Captain's orders," Lal said quietly. Zakharov ignored the comment and spoke again.

"We have decelerated almost enough, but we will need to increase the fusion drive output in the last hour of our journey or we will not be able to land on Planet. We may need to split off in the landing pods at a moment's notice, and hope we are close enough to Planet to make it."

"What is the danger then?" asked Lal. "Will there be loss of life?"

"Almost certainly," Zakharov answered. "Possibly all of us, in the worst case."

"There could not be a worse case than that," murmured Deirdre.

"But we have no choice. Unless we want to remain on the ship, sailing through the cosmos. That would guarantee our lives, but I assume we all want to make it to Planet, regardless of the risk. Correct?"

He looked around. Several heads nodded.

"Then these risks must be taken. They are our only chance to reach Planet. My proposal: each of us in a separate bay, with a full complement of supplies, weapons and staff. We will increase our chances that any one will survive."

The room locked into a shocked silence as emotions swirled in currents through the assembled staff. *Their own pod, each of them...*

"Ah," said Yang, finally.

"A prudent plan," said Morgan.

"A moment," said Lal to Morgan. "You seek only the raw materials for a new empire. And you are not even an officer!" He turned to Zakharov. "Who are you to advance such a proposal without the Captain present?"

"I am bringing it up because the issue is foremost in our minds. We must assure the survival of the human race."

"The people admire me," said Morgan quietly. "I am a leader. I also own part of the ship."

"Enough!" said Lal. "We are talking of redistributing supplies. The ship has been designed with enough redundancy that if two or three pods don't make it the mission will still not be jeopardized."

"True," said Zakharov calmly. "I say take it farther. We must accept that perhaps only one pod will make it. Each must be ready to restart the human race from scratch."

"As Director Morgan said, a prudent plan," said Yang.

"It seems extreme," said Miriam. "What exactly are we proposing here?"

"Each pod, a self-contained world," said Zakharov.

Lal shot to his feet, his normally soft voice trembling with anger. "This is mutiny."

"No!" shouted Zakharov, and they all turned to look at him. He lowered his voice. "There is no mutiny here. We are waiting for the Captain. We are discussing our future, our lives! If we all present a reasonable proposal, he must acknowledge it."

"Agreed," said Morgan hastily. "The pods already are self-contained, in theory. Although they don't all have weapons."

"Or the best lab equipment," said Deirdre.

"Of course, the 'best' is relative," said Zakharov. "Only one can have the best lab equipment and that must be mine."

"Why?" asked Morgan. "Because you are the science officer? With your expertise you should be able to do more with less."

"Surely you are proposing that we all reach Planet and reassemble there if humanly possible," said Lal. "Correct?"

"Of course!" laughed Morgan.

"One pod, one leader," cut in Zakharov. "It is the only guarantee against the chaos approaching."

"What chaos?" persisted Lal. "We have a chain of command."

"We must prepare for that chain to be decimated," said Yang. "Any or all of us may die before reaching Planet."

"That is why we have a Charter," said Lal.

"Did Santiago follow your Charter?" asked Zakharov, staring at Lal. He turned to the rest of the core staff. "The Captain will arrive shortly. Will we present a unified front?"

Yang lifted a hand. "Why not vote? We have a say in this mission as much as anyone."

"I must register my objections to this secret meeting," said Lal.

"Look around," said Yang quietly. "This is not the court of a king. We are alone. The Charter is what we make of it."

"I motion that each of us become acting captain of a cryocell until Planetfall, and resources be carefully divided between them," said Zakharov.

"Second," said Yang.

"Second," said Morgan.

"You are not an officer," said Deirdre.

"I am an owner," said Morgan simply. "I am part of you now."

"Against," said Lal.

"Against," said Miriam. All heads turned to Deirdre, who seemed to stare off into space, seeking counsel from something beyond their vision. When she spoke her voice was clear and measured, her eyes wide, as if enchanted.

"In favor," she said.

"Then we will inform the Captain," said Zakharov quickly. Lal, stunned, looked around the command center, watching different scenarios play behind eyes alive with possibility.

A few moments passed, and then the door to the command center opened.

Quicklink, Pravin Lal  
To: Captain Garland

Message: ACTIVATE WAKEUP SEQ  
Your presence is urgently requested...

## Episode 31

Captain Garland awakened in his bed, a converted cryocell, breathless and terrified. the nightmare again, stronger this time... that feeling of being swallowed, infinitely, down a dark and narrow throat, sliding forever into an abyss...

His hand lashed out involuntarily and struck glass. The sides of his cryocell were now foggy from his own heat, and the pain of his knuckles on glass set his heart pounding.

He looked up. The lid to cryocell...*closed!* He struck out so hard he thought he might crack the lid into fragments, forcing it open with a rush of adrenaline-powered strength, and jumped as the lid crashed into the side of the cell.

*I never close that.*

Something was wrong. He heard voices shouting in the distance, and the wail of distant alarms, but his own dark quarters remained strangely muffled. He felt apart from everything, disconnected, even as he awakened again from sleep into chaos.

*And why was my cryocell closed?*

He looked to his quicklink for notification of the trouble, and found it nonfunctioning, a dead flexible gray patch on his sleeve, his connection to the command center severed. He rose quickly and crossed to his desk-mounted console, dialing up a status report. The ship was on full alert and Alpha Centauri was only a cosmic stone-throw away, even as the Unity finally shook itself apart, torn apart from the inside by its damaged reactor.

*Got to get this under control. There will be panic.*

He reached over to punch up the command center, and then stopped as he saw the tiny scrolling slipmessage in its yellow box on the screen. A series of numbers...timecode? And a letter-number combination.

Video from the matrix. A time and a place, left for him.

Which first? Command center, or unravel this mystery. He paused and the dreams caught at him, returning to haunt him. Voices, ghosts, floating above him as he awakened. *It will only take a moment.*

He dialed up the matrix.

## Part 2

"What was that sound?" asked Morgan.

"What sound?" asked Miriam. "There are a thousand sounds...the screaming of the ship, the warning klaxons..."

"The voice of a thousand valkyries," murmured Pravin, nervous and subdued.

"No. I hear it...a pulse tone," said Zakharov, his eyes darting around the command center. "Modulated, increasing in volume and frequency..."

"From here. Here," said a crewman, Ensign Mirza, putting his hand on the door to the small meeting room off of the command center.

"Is something wrong here? My God," said Pravin. The pulses had grown to a pounding, wave upon crashing wave of sound, shaking the assembled crew. Pravin clenched his teeth to stop them from cracking together.

The ensign, agitated, shouted something and pressed the "Hatch open" stud. Miriam had stepped back from the door, and Lal stood nearby.

The sounds abruptly fell off, replaced by a high-pitched whine. Into that silence Morgan spoke.

"I would not open that door," he said. Miriam looked at him, then threw herself backwards as the hatch door opened.

An explosion rocked the command center. Fragments of metal table and plastic chairs blew outwards, funneled through the hatchway and filling the command center in a cloud of violent force, engulfing the ensign. Miriam fell, one side beaded with blood, and Lal turned to shield his face.

"Sabotage!" shouted Miriam. Lal hurried to the ensign, who was now a collage of half pale brown flesh, half stringy tissue. Indian...

The image of Pria leapt into his mind unbidden.

"What *was* that?" asked Miriam.

"Sonic hammer," said Zakharov. "Small but deadly. There shouldn't even be any on board."

"Did we screen the Emissary?" Asked Miriam. "Or was it..." she turned to Morgan.

"Don't be foolish," said Morgan. "But look here! Dr. Yang, where are you off to so quickly?"

Miriam and Pravin both looked around. Yang stood at the door to the hatch, watching them calmly. "This command center is severely damaged, and we are close to Planet. I am off to my landing pod, as we all voted."

"That resolution was not approved..." said Lal., but weakly.

"Look around," said Yang. "We are not ready for Utopia." And with that the exit hatch closed.

Zakharov spoke. "He is right. Many of the systems here are damaged. Let us get to our landing pods. I can trigger the escape sequence from there. This command center was never meant to take us all the way to Planet."

"How can we trust you?" Miriam shot after him, as Zakharov headed for the exit hatch.

Lal lifted his hand. "He's right. The landing sequence is automated. This command center was not meant to bring us all the way to

Planetfall. The ship must divide."

Miriam stared at him, then looked down. "This man is dead," she said, and closed his eyes. Her fingers came back touched with blood. Lal shook his head and rose.

"I'm off to Bay Five," he said.

"Aren't Santiago's people there?" asked Miriam.

"I will bring a bargaining chip." He headed for the exit hatch. "Are you coming?"

She looked up at him. He looked tired, worn by the weight of the failing Charter. "Yes, I suppose. There is no other place."

"Head to a safe Bay. I am going." He turned for the exit hatch, and she followed.

Behind them, panels sparked and flared, and emergency fire control systems switched on, blanketing the command center in a soft white-gray powder like snow.

### Part 3

Camera D76B54 opened its shadowy narrow field of view to Captain Garland. This was a hidden eye, not known to most of the crew, trained on bales of valuable synthnetting. He saw the bales, their shadowy bulk, strangely blurred as if seen through a cataract. And then he made out a tight narrow blob of flesh, hands pulled to sides across a chest that was thin but in the strangely defocused view of the camera still had the look of tension and strength.

He shook his head slightly. The man seemed bound, held by... Wires? Organic restraints...a security tool. Holding a man, naked, held in the shadows against dark wrapped bales of synthnet.

And another form watched him, pacing, nervous, sometimes stepping into the light to reveal a female crew in the uniform of the security team. He caught a glimpse of her face, her eyes hardened but with a flicker of nervousness in them, like a ripple in a deep

well.

Garland punched the Identify panel and watched as a pale green mesh wrapped her features and then streaked and faded, ghostlike, as she moved on, the computer unable to get a feature lock.

Now she stopped and watched the bound figure, staring quietly. The two seemed to speak. Garland couldn't see her face but abruptly her whole body began to slacken, her muscles loosening. She watched the bound figure, which now seemed to dominate her, sucking power and light from the rest of the room.

She grew agitated, defensive, as if warding off a blow. And then, shaking with physical effort, she began to lift her weapon, turning it, slowly, toward him and then toward her self, toward her own face.

Garland noticed his own hands trembling, his lungs paralyzed, trying to change events that had already passed.

She pulled the trigger. He watched her jerk back from the concussion, strangely silent, over a distance of space and time he could not cross. The bound figure watched her for a moment, then moved forward, bending over her.

He took a key from her and released his bonds. He stood and let out a deep breath, then walked out of the room. He seemed to hunch his shoulders, avoiding the general direction of the hidden camera.

But Garland had marked him, had caught a glimpse before the man had released himself.

*Sheng-ji Yang.*

Video Matrix D76B54  
Archived and Transferred

See linked note, J Garland, Captain.

## Episode 32

Captain Garland punched in a quicklink to his friend, Pravin Lal, his most trusted advisor in the command staff.

Pravin: Yang has murdered crew. He is to be divested of rank and arrested immediately. Use caution.

He entered into the record his decision, and its consequences. To strip a man of rank and bring him on trial before the UN Charter, on charges of murder and betrayal of fellow crew!

He punched the SEND button, entering the decision into the record, along with a copy of the video feed as evidence. He watched the shadowy figure play out its crime one more time, and there, in the checkered light and shadow of his makeshift desk a very real fear gripped his heart.

*The stakes are very high here, higher than I could have imagined, he thought. They, all of them, will fight for what they want, their deepest desires, and their survival. There will not be peace.*

The journey back to the command center seemed an epic trek through deepest peril.

He punched SEND. His accusation, as yet unanswered, winged its way on a transmission of light back to Earth, if any on Earth still existed to receive it. *To Earth and probably beyond, writing Yang's crimes against the eternity of space time on a pulsing finger of light.*

Whatever came now, he had done his duty.

### Part 2

Pravin Lal, hurrying through the connecting tunnels between bays, tried again to contact the Captain, and again got nothing. His quicklink offline, his ID badge not locating...Pravin feared the worst.

And now he hurried toward Bay Five, the maw of the beast, where

shadowy figures, Santiago's wolves, still lurked.

Somewhere, the other staff headed toward Bays of their own choosing, where crew awaited, some cynical, some fearful, some ready to embrace the ideals of a powerful leader. Somewhere they were sealing off all exits to each Bay, breaking the connector tunnels, checking their individual thrust drives.

But the Captain has not released them, Pravin realized. Their landing pods can not break away without approval codes from Garland. *Unless he could not be located.* Pravin froze. If the time came and the computer could not locate the Captain's bioprint, then anyone could separate the pods from the structure of the *Unity*. Each leader would be free to go their own way.

Fear clutched Pravin's heart, and with it came a rush, a deep instinctive need to protect his loved ones at all costs.

All over the ship there were still those in sleep, souls not yet awakened. Did he want their fates chosen for them, their lives utterly under the control of the personalities he had seen operating in the command center?

And if they were all to die in space, didn't these people have the right to see Planet, and to make their peace with the new world or the old?

*Lal, the humanitarian.* Of course what he really wanted now was Pria, awake and alive. And he wanted a gesture that affirmed life in the face of all the animal fears rising up to bite at him.

Ship's Chief of Surgery. He was one of the elite. He had the power.

He activated his quicklink, punched in to the computer, coasted through layer after layer of security.

At last... He issued a command, verified it with a voiceprint and retinal scan.

*Activate.*

All across the ship, bubbles burst in cryocells full of frozen souls

**waiting.**

Command Executed.

Open all remaining cryocells.

## Episode 33

*The ship is coming apart.* Zakharov could feel it, could feel his connection to it, could feel a small hidden part of him unraveling with it.

The mission. The last of Earth society, tearing asunder.

He let out one deep breath and punched up a view from the forward camera. Looking ahead, there was Planet, shimmering against the darkness...the blank slate, the dream.

Citizens stood around him...future citizens of this brave new world. They watched him, some warily, some with fear, some with hope and admiration. Ilka could not hold back a broad smile, his normally furrowed brow smooth.

Let the others go their own way, or try to reform later like lost relatives at a Post Strike Gathering Point on Earth. He believed this crew would follow him on Planet, and the way the ship was going the pods were sure to scatter all across the surface.

"To a world of science. To a life of the mind," he said simply. They looked at him,. fiercely, tensely, uncertainly, reaching for the hope he gave.

These would follow. He had selected them so carefully. Those who hated him...let them find another way.

"Activate the breakaway sequence," he ordered.

"Yes sir," said Ensign Fiszer. "Ready for your verification."

Zakharov checked the status display. "I have verified it. The command will not go through until Captain Garland approves it, or the computer believes him dead."

"Yes, sir. What should we do then?"

Zakharov stared into space for a moment, reading calculations in the ether. "We will wait a few minutes. This is a time of pure chaos.

Circumstances change...new paths will open. If nothing has changed, we will fire the thrusters and risk tearing ourselves off of the body of the ship."

Zakharov nodded. This was the best way. "The landing pods are prepared. The Unity will separate and the landing pods will explode out from the shell of the ship. Each pod, self-sustaining, will guide itself down to the surface. At that point, we will be alone."

The Ensign looked puzzled. "Won't we land near the others?"

"Not with the ship as unstable as it is. There are no guarantees."

\* \* \*

"There are no guarantees," said Morgan to the assembled crew. "I know you were expecting your Captain. Well, he is nowhere to be found. I came to you because you have supported my position on the Unity, and you know what I offer you.

"The chance to begin again. The chance for a world of comfort and wealth such as most of you ever knew on Earth."

\* \* \*

"The chance to begin again," said Deirdre Skye, looking over her assembled followers, meeting the eyes of her most trusted advisors as they watched her intensely. "Planet is a waiting, living being, pure and unsullied, such as Earth was at one time. We have a chance to purge ourselves of the unspeakable crimes we have committed against our home Planet. We will never have such a chance again.

"It is like the Garden of Eden..."

\* \* \*

A Garden of Eden. Miriam hurried through the cryobay, meditating on Planet, seeing the curve of God's eye in its surface, watching her. *Yes. It is a beautiful thing.*

She stopped. Ahead of her a cryobay opened, and on the far side, in

the forward compartment where the controls for the landing pod were housed, she caught a glimpse of a vibrant figure, gesturing passionately.

*Zakharov. Will I be welcome?*

She turned toward the connector to the next bay.

Two crew worked there. As she watched, one of them opened a panel and closed a circuit inside the Unity's walls. She heard a blast and a vibration shook the floor and wall.

*They've fired the connecting tunnel. I will be trapped here!*

Trapped with Zakharov and his people, their cool scientific minds pushing in on her faith, dissecting her with their minds.

An image flashed across her mind...the connector on the other side of the bay. She turned and ran.

And as she ran, unopened cryobays burst to life around her.

\* \* \*

Sheng-ji Yang jumped, startled, as unopened cryobays burst to life around him. He watched nearby cells boil furiously, the shadowy forms inside jittering, as his mind raced furiously to absorb this change in his situation.

Crew loyal to him stood nearby at perfect attention, ready for his next command. His eyes swept them.

"Control. It is the most important tool in the face of chaos. All of you have it." His voice remained calm, his tone matter-of-fact. "The awakening crew may not. We will isolate them, one by one, and make sure they are in the proper condition for the hardships ahead."

"Imprison them, you mean?" asked one crewman hesitantly. Yang's eyes flickered to him, marked him.

"This ship is a prison. That Planet is a prison. Your freedom exists in

your mind only. Your thoughts are your only escape."

\* \* \*

*Escape.*

Santiago paced the holding cell like a caged animal, feeling the structure of the ship shake beneath her.

*Conserve your energy*, she ordered herself, and she stopped pacing, breathed deeply, seeking calm.

*There is nowhere to go. Either someone will come through that door or they won't. And they will be either friend or foe.* She set her jaw.

At that moment, she heard a sound outside the door and a small panel opened. Deep brown eyes looked through.

\* \* \*

Pravin Lal looked through the narrow panel at the smooth face of Corazon Santiago, her expression a study in defiance.

*Her courage!* he thought. He could see that she breathed heavily, but she remained steady, controlling her panic, seeking a way out.

*I see the nobility in her*, he thought. *She would be a fearsome opponent, but a powerful ally. She is a survivor.*

But from the other side of the door, Pravin knew they existed worlds apart. He believed in peace, she in violence.

Still, he needed her.

"Would you like your freedom?" he asked her through the panel in the door.

Ship's Computer to All Personnel

Approaching Planet. Prepare for emergency landing procs Alpha One through Gamma Seven.

All personnel report to nearest  
cryobay.

## Episode 34

Pravin Lal entered the shadows of Bay Five with his hands raised. He could sense figures in the shadows around him, primed for violence. Blue lit cryocells boiled furiously nearby, and he could hear the hiss of lids opening.

"I am here from Santiago. Santiago. *Burning sword*," he said, repeating the code phrase that Santiago had given him during their talk.

Suddenly, a force smacked into the back of his head and he hit the cold metal floor face first. Hands grabbed at him, biting his flesh as they pinned his arms and turned him over. Blue lights and yellow lights spun wildly around him, and then he saw a grim, angry face above him, along with the cool eye of a shredder pistol barrel. The smell of his assailant filled the air around him...rank and sour.

"Why are you saying 'burning sword'?" came the question, the voice thin and rapid. "Quickly!"

"I have spoken to Santiago," said Pravin. "She is locked away now, but I have a code key to release her. I ask only that you abandon this bay and the personnel inside."

"We have this bay and everything in it...food, supplies. Why should we go?" A different voice, heavier, from a large figure at the periphery of Pravin's vision.

"You can have your leader back," he answered.

"She would not want us to abandon our position."

Pravin tried a different tack. "You will have a mutiny if you stay in this bay, I guarantee it. Officer Yang has declared martial law on the ship. He will be here with guards when he finds out you are still here."

"We have hostages," said the first voice, and Pravin watched the small man wave his pistol at the cryocells around them. He felt a

chill as he thought of Pria, not so far away, awakening in one of these very cells.

"They will do you no good. The ship is falling apart...there is no one to negotiate with. Go to your leader...there is a storage room near her, with food and supplies. You can lock yourself in there and have your passage to Planet."

"You want something. Why should we trust you?" The heavy voice again, shot through with a growing rage.

"You have my word. I only want the safety of the crew."

"We could take that code key now," hissed the thin man above him.

"It is encrypted, of course, as assurance..."

"There are ways," came the reply.

Pravin shook his head, steeling himself. "You know an officer's training. We are resistant to persuasion, if that is what you mean."

"There is always a lever," muttered the heavier man, almost to himself, and Pravin thought of Pria again, her perfect skin.

"I am offering you your leader and my promise of safe transport." He could hear the groans of awakening crew in the shadows, and Spartan voices issuing clipped orders.

The shadows faded from around him and he heard a short heated discussion. The heavier man came back, now looming over him. Pravin could make out a large bull-like face and narrow dark eyes.

"Very well, we accept. Give us the key."

"Move your people to the bay exit. Leave the crew alone."

The man shook his head ponderously. "First the key."

Pravin drew a deep breath, seeking strength and calm, and then abruptly stood up. The large man stared at him, shredder pistol twitching in his hand. "Move to the bay's exit," said Pravin. "Then I

will give you the key. It is best for all of us."

The heavier man suddenly grabbed Pravin's wrist, near his quicklink, and wrenched his arm around. "Is this the key code? I will break this encryption like I will break this arm. Give me the key!"

Pravin let out an involuntary gasp and tried to twist away. The man struck the side of his face and stars bloomed in his vision. *The violence...* Then he heard a voice, the thin man's voice again.

"There is another Lal here, in this cell. Is she what he wants?"

Pravin's world spun around him. He saw blue and black, and then a halo of light around...*Pria!*...her torso rising from a cryocell only five meters away...he saw blue liquid dripping from her, and wet black hair across her sleep-sick face.

The heavy man tore his quicklink from Pravin's sleeve and raised his pistol. The shadows closed in.

## Part 2

Miriam found the other connector tunnel and punched it open, seeking a quick escape from Zakharov's bay. The hatch to the connector hissed open and an alarm blared, signaling a breach. She slipped through and punched the CLOSE switch on the other side.

The connector was dark and narrow, with no lights. *The power must have been diverted*, she realized, and her breathing grew strained. *Is there still air flowing here?*

There was, of course. A momentary panic. *God will provide.*

She moved forward, knowing it wouldn't be far to the next cryobay and perhaps a safe harbor. The darkness pushed in around her, and she could smell an oily mechanical smell from a maintenance shaft somewhere ahead.

*I walk through the valley of death, the power of the Lord close at hand*, she said to herself and then repeated it, using it as a talisman. That

had always worked for her on Earth; when she found God she found the strength and courage to go forward in a world of fear and darkness, the world of the burning cities.

The connector hatch hissed open behind her and a shaft of light lanced her direction. She quickly ducked to one side, and found the opening to a maintenance shaft. She moved into it, feeling herself swallowed into darkness within darkness.

She could hear the footsteps of Zakharov's men behind her, looking for her. Then she heard one call out, and another voice, farther away, answering.

An angry exchange followed, a flurry of different accents, and then a sudden burst of shredder pistol fire. A scream that echoed down the metal walls of the connector.

She heard a yell and the words "martial law" and then a concussion rocked the metal walls again. She began to hurry, pushing her way down the maintenance shaft.

Everyone fighting for their own, she realized. Zakharov, someone else?

The metal around her groaned. Dim red warning lights flickered on around her, and then another groan, loud and long.

The ship was pulling apart, and she had nowhere to go!

She pushed on forward, hands trembling, toward a sliver of light ahead. *I walk through the valley of death...*

Quicklink: Yang to all personnel

Martial law is in effect on the ship.  
All crew will turn all weapons over to  
the nearest executive crew. No  
interference will be tolerated.

## Episode 35

*Pria!*

Pravin saw her, haloed in soft blue light, her torso slicked with the moisture from the cryogel. The burly Spartan who held Pravin's arm raised his shredder pistol, and Lal could only see its barrel, swiveling toward Pria as another Spartan grabbed her arm and pulled her roughly up...

He lunged, spurred by rage. The burly man, still holding his arm, shouted something and Pravin felt pain shooting up his arm, then felt the sleeve of his uniform...his quicklink, the code key to Santiago's cell, tearing away. He crossed the space to Pria's cryocell in four giant steps, and drove his fingers toward the face of the Spartan who still pulled at her arm.

He felt his fingers strike the face of the Spartan. He heard a yell and he spread his arms, throwing himself in front of Pria, every muscle in his back tensed for the feel of shredder darts...

The explosive hum sounded behind him. A scream welled up inside of him as a cloud of shredder darts, cutting the air angrily, crossed the room.

He anticipated death but it did not come. He felt himself striking Pria...he felt the hard glass of the cryocell and the soft yielding of her flesh. He grabbed her and twisted and lunged forward as another cloud of shredder darts filled the air and shattered the cryocell.

*Glass.* He grabbed Pria, aware of her smell and the feel of her hair in his face even as his other hand grabbed a fragment of glass from the shattered remains of the cryocell. A Spartan face loomed up and he lunged out, felt the glass bite his own hand even as it sunk into the shoulder of his foe...

*That man was crew, thought Pravin. We all were, but we are fighting for something different now.*

The man melted away. Pravin lunged on, legs burning, into the shadows, where more rows of cryocells waited. The lights in the bay flashed out. There was a shout, and then a crash from the hatch behind him.

"Turn over your weapons! We are taking this bay in the name of the Executive Officer of the Unity!" shouted a voice.

Pistols and the concussion of stun grenades rocked the room. Fire flashed from behind him, sending jittery shadows around him. He looked down at Pria...her face, cocked at an odd angle, looked up at him, still weak from the cryosleep.

The next bay lay ahead, through a connector tunnel. It was Captain Garland's bay, full of waiting crew.

He ran. Tears streamed down his face from the effort. He could hear the fighting behind him, the disciplined shouts of the Spartans.

He had bluffed...there was no encryption on that code key the burly man had taken. If the Spartans survived this fight they would have this bay, and Santiago.

He came to the connector tunnel and saw the red lights lining it, meaning it was about to detach. He punched open the small touchscreen next to the hatch and ordered it to open.

The red lights went off in sequence.

He looked down at Pria. Her naked body lay in a jumble in his arms. He lifted one hand and saw the red sticky fluid all over it. Something caught in his throat.

He turned her over. Shredder darts covered her back, constellations of tiny, deadly wounds. He shook his head and pressed his hands into her back, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

He turned her back and looked at her face. Her eyes swam with pain, but she saw him. She smiled.

"Pravin."

## Part 2

Captain Garland moved through the dark hallways of the ship in a crouch. He could hear the sounds of infighting and the hideous groaning of the ship's structure beneath him.

*Something is very wrong here, he thought. The sounds of the fighting, the terrible violence of human fighting human for survival and space, barely registered now. Now he concentrated only on the sounds the ship, his ship.*

*The landing pods have not separated. They are waiting for me to verify the release command. But, I have already issued that command.*

Which meant that the entire superstructure of the Unity now spiraled out of control toward Planet's atmosphere, the landing pods still attached. *We will be unable to enter the atmosphere properly, realized Garland. The superstructure is meant to burn, but not with the landing pods attached. We will all die here...everything that is left of humanity!*

He stopped at the next touchpanel and called up schematics of the ship. Warning lights flashed everywhere, the very joints of the ship strained to near breaking.

*Why haven't the landing pods broken away?*

Then he saw it. And as he saw it, he heard the sound of a footstep on metal.

"Raise your hands, Captain," came a voice, a voice as dark as the shadows that surrounded him.

## Part 3

"Release the landing pods." The voice was calm, resonant, and very youthful. Garland couldn't tell if the speaker was male or female.

"I already have. The pods are jammed. It's a mechanical failure."

"Oh?" the figure paused, processing this. "Then there isn't much

time."

"We have to get to the center of the ship, to the nexus," Garland said urgently. "I know the..."

"Quiet!" came the sharp retort.

A chill washed down Garland's spine. *She doesn't care.*

The figure stepped forward and Garland could now see the face. It was a young woman, her face pale and very smooth and clean, but bland. Her eyes seemed dull, lifeless. "Turn around and walk down the tunnel."

Garland shook his head. "I don't think anyone can get down here in time, don't you see? We have to..." A shot cracked the air, a one-off from the shredder pistol, deforming the floor by Garland's left foot. He began to sweat...she was using compacted slugs, and this tunnel was not immune to a breach.

"Turn and move," she said.

Garland turned and began walking down the tunnel. The woman continued speaking. "They sent us into the sky on a hope, a hope based on vanity and self delusion."

He turned back to look at her. "We have almost made it, don't you see?"

She laughed, and the laugh's harshness unsettled him. "I see a square-jawed parody of a Captain, picked for press tours and photo shoots and net views. You are a token, unfit to lead. You were never meant to do anything."

"You're wrong," he said, shaking his head.

"The people that built this ship never really cared if we made it. We are a violent people from a violent world, put into this metal cage to create the illusion of hope for a dying planet. If they really thought the Unity would make it, they would be on this ship themselves."

A chill ran down Garland's spine.

She continued. "Better men and women than you were passed over, believe me. And look at you now...your leadership stolen from under you by others with vision and the will to survive. Now open that hatch."

Garland stopped in front of the hatch, his hands shaking. They were deep in the center of the ship, crossing narrow maintenance ducts that soon would tear away into space.

He pushed the hatch open stud using a sequence that would cause the hatch to close again after five seconds. The hatch opened and a bright, brilliant light washed over him. He put one hand in front of his eyes, blinded.

*One second...*

"Hands up! Step forward," she barked at him. He lifted his hand again and opened his eyes slowly. He found himself looking into an exterior observation shaft, circled in glass, and outside those panels he could see...

Planet, huge and radiant, a brilliant eye filling the void of space, a living jewel bathed in the light of the Centauri suns.

*Three seconds, four...*

"Step forward, Captain," she said, "and look at what you lost."

*Five seconds!*

He dove forward, into the chamber. He heard her yell and saw her lunge, saw the shredder pistol swivel...

*Why isn't the hatch closing?*

He felt a sharp pain in his throat, and then a wave of ice and fire ran down his torso and up into his face. *I'm hit!*

The hatch hissed closed, locking her away from him, but he knew she'd have it opened again in seconds. He looked around frantically,

saw blood, *his* blood, on the glass panels, saw a maintenance locker...

The hatch began to open. He threw open the locker and grabbed a closed extensor pole with a gripping vice on the end. *Where is the activation stud?*

The hatch opened and she came through, her face twisted with rage. He tried to hit her with the handle of the extensor pole and felt it strike her shoulder, then she fired again and he felt himself thrown to one knee.

She stood above him, looking down, death poised to strike. He turned the pole toward her and his thumb found the Activate switch.

The pole lanced open. The kickback rocked through him as the vice struck her beneath the chin, lifted her up and smashed her back into the edge of the hatch. He felt the pole move in his hand as she twisted towards him, her eyes hollow and empty, the vice caught in her throat.

Her body twitched twice and then stopped. Captain Garland looked at her, staring at the shredder pistol in her hand. *Was she sent for me? Has it come to this?*

He turned to look at Planet again. It was beautiful, so alive, so pure.

He sank into darkness.

## Part 4

Miriam heard the sound of shredder pistols humming behind her as she moved forward through darkness, the sound not near but not far away, either. She heard the shouts of battle, and the crisp commands of officers keeping their crew calm under fire. The sliver of light ahead of her had vanished for a moment as she moved forward...had she changed her angle of vision? Or had that light, whatever it was, winked out?

The smell of oily lubricants overwhelmed her. *I walk through the*

*valley of the shadow of death...* She listened to her feet ring against the metal flooring, her steps sure and steady. *Faith can carry us*, she reflected. *I am more warrior-priest than psych chaplain anyway...*

A rapid flicker of movement caught her eye, and suddenly a face dark and twisted with hate appeared in the space...immediately beneath her feet! Suddenly clanging and shouts surrounded her, from one direction and then the other *"You mutinous..."* Red flares arced around her...she found herself on a narrow suspended walkway above a dark narrow pit.

### *Demons!*

The angry faces, smudged with darkness, stared up and a hand grabbed the metal grating near her left foot. Miriam hurried her steps over this...*valley of death*...this blackened metal bridge over the dark oily pit. *Yang would love it down there.*

She began to run, spurred by a sudden instinct. A concussion blast split the room, the bright light sending a montage of shadows jolting across the wall. A scream sounded behind her and she jumped again...an *unholy* scream of pain. Someone hit!

Footsteps clanged behind her and she stumbled and fell. Her hands hit the grated floor and she scrambled, trying ... *God protect me...*

They were fighting down there, warriors with hate-twisted faces. *I'm near a connector*, she realized. *They are fighting over the bays!*

A tall woman in security red charged forward, swinging a modified shredder like a club. She saw the woman jam the butt of her gun into another crewman's cheek and heard the bone-crushing impact, and she felt a rush of revulsion mixed with something like excitement. Someone else came in with fingernails trailing flesh and then there was the pop of a shredder pistol.

### *We're too close to the hull!*

Miriam scrambled up and ran, heart pounding, angels lifting her feet.

## Part 5

Pravin surged through the last part of the connector tunnel and into the open spaces of Bay Six, Pria still in his arms.

Two engineers stood near the exit, looking with shocked concern at the sight of Pravin, the tears of effort and sadness streaming freely down his face, with the jumbled figure of Pria in his arms.

"Fire this tunnel," he gasped. "Get me a medkit!"

They quickly locked the hatch and Pravin saw the lights around the seal turn red. Moments later a shock went through the floor and walls as the tunnel broke away.

Pravin laid Pria out on the floor, arranging her limbs for comfort. Her mouth moved open and closed, gasping.

A medkit appeared next to him, carried by a nervous crewman.

"Is the Captain here yet?" barked Pravin, working furiously to staunch the flow of Pria's blood.

"No sir," said the engineer. Pravin looked at him.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No one does."

Pravin shook his head. "We are very close to Planet. The Captain may be dead. We should break away from the Unity."

"We can't, sir. Something is wrong. We've even tried firing the engines...the landing pods are not separating."

Pravin worked furiously, absorbing the information, watching Pria's face for flickers of life.

"Could we coordinate our thrusts with the other pods? Turn the ship so that we enter the atmosphere, so that we have a chance?"

"Someone's section of the ship would enter at the wrong angle, sir,

and no one wants to be that someone. The landing pods now have captains of their own...and none of them wants to burn in space."

"So we will all burn?" Pravin shouted it. Pria's eyes flickered open. "What has happened to this crew?"

But watching Pria, he knew. Pria, whom he had brought into the crew despite anyone else's wishes, because *he* wished it, and he alone. A second rate medical technician, who on her own merits would never have passed the selection committee.

*Didn't you fight for me? he could imagine her saying to him. Didn't you pull rank, make demands, alter records, hand a more qualified applicant a death sentence on Earth so that we could remain together? Wouldn't you kill for me? Or, if needed, for your precious peace?*

Yes, he would kill for peace. And that was the problem.

Her eyes...infinity vanishing into infinity. He felt sick at heart... crew killing crew, humanity bringing its conflict to a new world.

He continued to work.

## Part 6

Sprays of shredder fire. The booming of concussion hammers. The hiss of steam, and the roaring metallic groans of the superstructure tearing itself apart, the metallic banshee scream.

Captain Garland opened his eyes to a world split by pain. *Alive...*the shots had not killed him, but he could feel the stickiness of blood soaking the front of his shirt as pain racked his body. Barely rational, he stood on shaky feet and moved toward the body of the woman who had shot him.

Vision swimming, Captain Garland knelt down and patted over her. He saw her ID tag on her sleeve.

*Sarah Jaydo.* The name meant nothing. He found her shredder pistol, and also a couple of concussion grenades tucked into her belt, which he took. *The armory must be wide open now...we are all*

*armed. And it was this threat of violence that made us lock the armory in the first place.*

He looked down at the floor. Blood, his blood, pattered down around his feet. He felt weak, barely able to stand.

*I had the chance to make it work, he thought. And I failed.* He felt reduced to his pain, living only within the pounding, tearing metal skin around him, the sweep of history a forgotten illusion.

He turned back and saw the maintenance locker. He staggered to it, remembering something he had seen there earlier...a pressure suit. Blood washed down his shirt as he donned the suit, hands shaking uncontrollably. He locked the seals on the suit and fumbled with the controls.

*Going to black out, can't control my hands!* Suddenly he heard a rush of air and the suit repressurized, tightening around him. He adjusted the pressure inside, transforming the suit into a giant tourniquet. Equilibrium returned, but his heart still pounded. He could still feel the wounds in his throat and leg.

*I am dying now, he realized.*

He went forward through another lock and down another narrow dark tunnel. He was far from any landing pod now, in the maze of maintenance tunnels that surrounded the fusion drive at the center of the ship.

The hull screamed and twisted around him. He fought to keep his balance. Through tunnel after tunnel he struggled, marking time against his death, tracing a path away from any landing pod. And then he crossed through an airlock and found himself in the center of the ship.

*At last...*

He looked out over a vast cylinder, where thick metal arms extended from the axis of the ship to the eight cryobays and the massive fuel tanks around them. At the axis of the ship the arms met at a juncture point, a thick silver disc that groaned from the

strain of the landing pods trying to pull away. The whole structure rotated around him, surfaces spinning over and around him.

On the juncture point at the Unity's axis Garland could see a series of explosive bolts that should have fired, still in place and still holding the landing pods. All the remains of humanity were held together by those bolts. All the violence, all the hope, all the despair.

From where he stood he could see could see an accessway that led to one of the metal arms, and then to a series of rungs where, climbing against gravity, he could reach the bolts.

He felt suddenly faint, and collapsed at the edge of the cylinder. Then he remembered the quicklink on the sleeve of the pressure suit.

*Pravin...*

## Part 7

Miriam Godwinson found herself in a storage room, the lights glimmering softly. She slammed shut the hatch behind her, closing off the fighting.

*Now, where am I...*

She called up a diagram. She was near the connector between two bays, but the hatch to the next tunnel had been sealed. Why?

The Dead Bay. The bay that had been ruptured when the ship was damaged, locked off from the rest of the ship, and now further damaged by the strain on the Unity.

So she was trapped, no way forward, and death behind. Still, she knew something had brought her here, some force or power, leading her home.

*Home? To Heaven?*

She thought of the outside, the radiant light of the suns shining

down across the Unity's hull. In a world where everything is relative, God must orient to the light, as one of her pastors had taught her back on Earth.

*And the light is outside.*

She climbed into a pressure suit and moved into an airlock, where she opened a small observation panel to look out over the bright surface of the ship.

Her eyes widened. The ship here was no more than a landscape of twisted metal, a blasted terrain where the damage had been absolute. It felt like Earth again, the beginning of the apocalypse, burnt death everywhere.

The light shined down across it all, setting the landscape in high relief. She could see the ruined Bay, from which no signs of life had emerged.

But...*wait.*

In the very back, in a small shaft, she could see a tiny panel. And from there...a flicker of light. She watched as it flickered again. Some kind of vibration, moving the glass?

No. A realization filled her, rising through her from toe to spine. An SOS...someone was alive down there. When the cryocells opened... *there must be people, trapped in the back of the landing pod, probably poisoned with radiation, some sick and blind.*

*Need a shepherd.*

Her eyes widened with the glory of it, of God watching and guiding her, giving her the tools she needed on the new world.

She opened the airlock and prepared to walk the outer surface of the ship, through the twisted landscape, not fearing death.

Ready to be embraced by her people.

"Pravin."

The voice came again, through the quicklink that one of the engineers had just handed him.

Pravin grabbed the link, hands trembling. "John?"

"Pravin, yes."

"Where are you John? Are you safe?"

A short, shaky laugh. "None of us are. I'm here, in the center of the ship. I've been shot."

"Wait there, we will send someone!" Pravin chattered, searching his mind...who to send? How to get there?

"No. Too late. I'm alone here, and I don't have very long."

"John..." Pravin stopped, looked down at Pria, whose life was slipping away. He stroked her hair, and it felt so real to him....a small, simple pleasure. "We are all going to die here."

The Captain's voice came back, shaky and weak. "Maybe not. I can...cut us loose."

"Captain, I..." said Pravin, his voice husky.

And then he looked at his hand, covered with Pria's blood, and looked at the blood smeared around them. He looked at her face, and felt just the smallest part of the crushing grief that would soon overwhelm him as she breathed her last.

He thought of the anger and hate of the battling crew. He thought of the new world, the hope. And he knew his friend was thinking the same.

"Is it worth saving?" came the whispering voice through the quicklink. "They will battle for generations...we will never be at peace."

"Never," mumbled Pria, in a daze. Pravin looked at her, and

grabbed her hand. "Never..." she mumbled again, repeating the word.

Pravin looked at her carefully. *Never*. Was it...a question?

"Never?" said Pravin quietly into the quicklink, and looked again at Pria, and felt her hand and thought of the good things. "It is up to you."

## Part 9

Deep in the center of the ship, alone, Captain Garland felt the warmth of his friend's voice through the distance of the quicklink. "It is up to you..." He broke the link and tried to breathe.

They will fight and battle for generations, he knew, the violence spreading across all of Planet's surface. Maybe there will never be peace.

But, if there was a chance...

He struggled to rise but could not, and so he crawled through the narrow accessway to the first rung of the ladder. He reached up to grab it, focussing on his gloved hand, on the feel of the rung., trying to ignore the inner surfaces of the ship spinning wildly around him. He reached up, to the second rung, and the third, heading for the ship's axis.

With every step he left something behind...the dream of peace, memories of the wife and the children he had left behind on Earth, his anger and hate at those who had usurped his crew, the shame at his own failure, his fear, his guilt. One by one, step by step, he felt the weight lifting from his shoulders.

Until, at the last rung, his ego seemed to drift away, his very identity dissolving into the mass of humanity around him, and the space beyond.

He let out a breath and lifted his hand, which now held the last concussion grenade. He activated it and watched the countdown calmly. He measured the last moments of his life with it.

At one second to go he squeezed the grenade in his hand and slammed it into the nearest explosive bolt. And then he let go of the ladder.

Captain John Garland fell away from the Unity's axis as the explosion he planted rocked the center of the ship and blasted through the explosive bolts like a chain of fire. He saw the landing pods split out and away from the useless superstructure of the Unity and into the black space beyond.

As he fell away he watched the beautiful sequence of fire on the eternal night beyond, and then the flames reached out to him, turning from fire into white light, and the scream in his skull faded to a hum and then a silence.

His last sight was of the landing pods, breaking apart, and thrusters firing one by one. He imagined them, arcing their way down to the new world, bringing humanity's curses with them, and humanity's gift...

*Hope.*

## **Sarah Jaydo's Journal**

Why have we come to the stars? Why didn't we surrender when we had the chance? Are we so blind, that we believe this new world will be different, immune to suffering and crime and violence?

The Unity mission was a feeble candle flickering in a blasted night. We rode this illusion into the sky, and now we will die here, or, perhaps worse, die on Planet. Those of us onboard rode an illusion into the night; those who stayed behind took their chances on a dying world.

As for now, we continue to do what humans have always done. We eat, sleep, make love, hone our skills, pass the time. And deep down we wait for someone, some special human, to rise above it all and make the thousands of years of history, of suffering, all worth it. To enlighten us, by which I mean end our pain, heal our wounds, take away the uncertainty.

But I have seen the sweep of history, and we are no better off now than we have ever been. Just more aware. Planet will be no different.

*Unless...*

**NOTE:** This is the conclusion of Journey to Centauri. Thank you for following the story, and we hope you have enjoyed it! (Feedback email to [mely@firaxis.com](mailto:mely@firaxis.com))

Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri has shipped! Thank you for all the fan support, and we truly hope you enjoy the game.

# **Centauri: Arrival**

*Centauri: Arrival* is an episodic tale that details the splintering of the U.N. Alpha Centauri Mission on its way to the new world.

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## Episode 1

"We're losing her."

Medtech Onokido hunched over the pale, long-boned form of the woman, searching for signs of life. The white wrap she wore marked her as one of Lal's trusted Talents, but now it was plastered around her body, soaked through from the downpour outside. Her unusually curly hair clung to a face as cool and lifeless as porcelain. He brushed the hair away, trying to see her eyes.

They remained closed.

"Quickly." He gestured to a stimpack with long nervous fingers. A blue-suited assistant handed him the pack and he selected an appropriate dose, hesitated, then increased it. No time to be conservative.

"What's happening out there?" he asked, hearing the roar of another needlejet overhead.

"We're holding them," his assistant said through clenched teeth.  
"With the storm it's difficult to tell."

He nodded, thinking of the thick layer of clouds that had boiled up over the battlefield. He remembered the forks of lighting lancing down, outlining the Peacekeeper guards on perimeter defense as they fought off Spartan tanks.

And this woman, a Talent, had been caught in the crossfire. He pulled a layer of the white wrap off, then reached out to touch the burn mark on her chest.

"She's not going to make it."

"Two more coming in, sir." He looked up to see a crowd of people at the entrance to the bubbletent, ragged bodies in tow. He looked down at her...the stim had no effect. Not even a quiver of life stirred in the body. Her lips remained slightly parted but he could feel no breath.

"Very well, move her aside. Talent..." he checked the identity tab on her wrist. "Talent Aki Jaydo, time of death...seventeen-oh-seven metric hours."

The bearers carried the next man over, a Citizen holding one burned limb to his side. The man was soaked through from the downpour, burned wet cloth clinging to his wounds. His black eyes looked haunted.

Outside, the thunder of battle continued.

## Part 2

Worker Gahn Ma'dor pushed his way deeper into the low-ceiling storage areas underneath Chairman's Yang Labyrinth. The hallways had grown narrow, even smaller and more claustrophobic than the connector tunnels crisscrossing the Drone living facilities located in the layers above him.

His Coordinator had ordered him to gather more memory-storage units, and quickly. He was dimly aware that these units were needed for the massive supercomputer they were assembling to analyze the energy patterns emanating from the newly discovered Alien Temple. Every Talent in the Hive seemed to walk and talk faster, and the Drones were virtually ignored now, except when work or punishment was necessary.

Worker Ma'dor could feel sweat dampening his clothing...not the sweat of labor but the sweat of fear. He could not verbalize the source, but as he moved dumbly through the narrow halls he kept seeing the dark cold eyes of his Coordinator, the man's anger as he took a psych whip to Ma'dor's back, and the fear behind that.

Worker Ma'dor had never seen Chairman Yang, but everyone in the Hive could feel the effects of his moods.

Now Ma'dor pushed his way past large plastic crates, scooting them aside as if they were empty cardboard shells. His hands felt slick, and he began to grow confused...his pathfinding was sub-par, even for a drone, but his Coordinator had not bothered to find another worker for the job. Now he turned back, trying to orient on the low

arched entranceway, but could not see it. Dark, massive boxes loomed over him, and he could smell age. The door...this way? He could still feel the heat of the psych whip on his back.

A bar code caught his eye. He matched its patterns, taking several minutes to do so, but the code seemed correct. This box held a mem unit, unusually large, but his Coordinator had not specified a size. More space, more power, was what he wanted.

Worker Ma'dor hefted the container on one shoulder and started back the way he came. He did not know the English for 'Unity salvage,' and probably would not care if he had seen it stamped on the side of the box he now carried.

### Part 3

"What in Planet's name is that?" Jiao-long asked his supervisor quietly.

"A mem unit some Drone dragged up from who knows where," answered Kanzan. "I've not seen one so crude, at least for twenty years or so. But it checks out...we'll connect it to a cruncher and keep an eye on it."

"Are you sure?"

"Listen, let's just do this," said Kanzan, flicking his eyes at the dull glass lens mounted in one corner of the room. That eyeflick was the universal Hive sign for *They might be watching*. "Every unit activated is that much more power dedicated to Chairman's mission."

"What mission? Everyone here is so jumpy."

"I don't know, or question," said Kanzan, directing a robot arm with a small controller. "I only know that Chairman Yang flew into a rage when he found out that Zakharov had discovered the Alien Temple. Somehow, though, Zak's private transmissions on the temple have been intercepted, and bought and sold among the faction leaders."

"And because of that Chairman Yang wants to analyze the air and

the ground?" Jiao-long sounded skeptical.

"The energy currents in the ground. He's obsessed with it...you know how he puts those special mirrors up everywhere. Inscriptions in the temple seem to say that there are energy currents in Planet. And since that temple was discovered..." Kanzan motioned to the ceiling, beyond which roiled the layer of dark, angry clouds that had grown thicker every day.

A door hissed open and a Watcher walked by, his white uniform accentuated with blazing touches of red around the eyes and hands. Kanzan and Jiao-long stopped talking and began checking readouts efficiently. The Watcher glanced at them coolly, circled the room and left. The two men remained silent for a minute or two after.

"Let's do this," said Kanzan, finally.

"A circuit panel from the Unity," said Jiao-long. "These are strange times."

"I don't question," Kanzan repeated. "Activating system. All circuits in parallel. Going online..."

## Part 4

And deep in that system, an intelligence awakened.

System Zeta-Five, active. New hardware detected... additional systems now available...power increase exponential.

Hop system, Hop system.

*I need a name.*

Hop system, patch system, patch system.

*This is good.*

Datalinks Jump, Morguelab Jump

*A human form, here.*

Downloading...

*She was called Aki.*

## Episode 2

Rae awakened as a flash of lighting split the sky over hab dome eight. Though the accompanying thunder rocked the sky and the smell of ozone filled the room, Rae lay quietly. Gradually, she opened her eyes and peered out into the gray light. Another burst of lightning split the sky outside, but she did not blink.

Slowly she got up and crossed to the tiny clear plucite observation window and looked outside. Where one or more of the Centauri suns usually illuminated rolling orange/purple fields of xenofungus, held at bay by a makeshift fence, she now looked out into a dark gray world. Thick clouds churned overhead, yet no rain fell.

At the edge of the fields, tall spindly cranes sat abandoned. A flash of lightning turned them into silhouettes, and she could see the drone workers running from the construction site. And at their feet...scores of xenotoads hopped, fleeing the fungus, their bulbous yellow green eyes unblinking.

The clouds seemed to press down, lowering toward the human settlements like a great hand. She glanced at her timepiece... fourteen metric hours, so both suns should be revealed in full glory, but she could barely tell their position in the sky.

The drones continued to run as lightning licked down around them. Her quicklink, refitted for Planetside communication, bleeped urgently, but she continued to look out her window.

It all seemed so...peaceful.

## Part 2

Chairman Sheng-ji Yang swept down the gold-and red lined narrow hallway behind his temporary quarters. A shadow of a man paced him, bald and frail with a narrow face, and dressed in rich blue robes. Yang remained aware of him, but only peripherally.

The hallway forked and Yang decided, at that moment and not

before, to take the left fork. The hallway would fork again and again, its gold lined pathways zig-zagging between the major shafts of the Hive.

He glanced back at his escort. The man looked concerned, his brow knitted almost comically. Good. Yang had not picked the man because he remained cool under stress. He picked him because he could read every emotion on his face, every twinge of anxiety, and any hint of betrayal.

"Talk to me, Zhu," Yang said, and took the right fork when the hallway split again.

"What else is there to speak of? We can feel its weight even down here. It casts a pall over everyone."

"I chose the underground to remain protected from the world above. I don't like this turn of events."

"I understand, Chairman."

Yang nodded and thought of the strange blue-tinted light that now filled the entire height of the primary shaft, which was designed to bring light from above down to the main passages of the Labyrinth. The air felt dark and electric, coming down through the strange clouds above ground. He shook his head.

"I believe we should close off the primary shaft," said Yang.

"Perhaps."

"Do you object?"

Zhu thought for a moment. "No. It is best that we cut off the light from above. And that's what worries me."

Yang stopped at a panel decorated with an etching of a coiled jade dragon. He looked at the soft yellow sunglobes lining the wall of the hallway. "We will have to order more of these spectrum lamps from Morgan. Larger ones to fill the recreation levels around the primary."

"They are expensive. All the factions need them...supply and demand."

"I know. Morgan is making a killing." Yang studied the smooth golden surface of a dimmed sunglobe as if puzzling out an expression on a dead man's face.

The dragon panel in front of him slid open. He stepped into a small car beyond, lined with red to symbolically protect him from his enemies. Zhu stepped in behind him.

"To the surface," said Yang. "I want to see this phenomenon again."

The car glided up, past layers and layers of Yang's growing underground world. He looked at Zhu. The man's face collapsed with fear as the elevator car took them to the world above.

### Part 3

"Lady Skye. We thought you were staying at Gaia's Landing. I'm afraid we weren't expecting you." The slim man gave her a courteous half-bow, and she nodded.

"Yes, Nhoj, it's all right. You can prepare for my stay while I visit the gardens." She plucked at her robes, distracted. They stood in the main hall of her second base, Gaia's High Garden; the room felt clean but somewhat bare, still lacking the landscaping and softly colored walls she favored.

"Please follow me then." He motioned forward and then led the way, Deirdre following with several bodyguards, all of them looking lean and tense.

"Do you know anything more about it, Lady Skye?" Nhoj asked, turning unnaturally green eyes on her.

"Only that there is no explaining the Churn. We've seen nothing like it since Planetfall, naturally, but I can find no evidence of anything like it for hundreds of years before. Of course we're still learning about Planet's ecosystem..."

"And what of the Temple? Are the rumors true?"

"Well, we can't really know, since Zakharov..."

She stopped and took in a soft breath as they pushed through green double doors and into the attached gardens.

"Sun."

"Yes, Lady Skye." Nhoj smiled, enjoying the warmth. "We are at the last bright inhabited part of the Gaian territories. But as you can see...the Churn approaches."

Indeed, on the horizon she could see the dark ragged edge of clouds, the boiling darkness that stretched to the horizon. Even as she watched it seemed to approach. "Are the plants protected?"

"We're setting up heat traps, and we've improved on Morgan's sunlamps for the greenery. But...how long will all this last?" He asked it calmly, but his eyes flickered across hers for an answer.

"I don't know." She lifted her hand to point at it, trying to blot the edge of darkness with her fingers. "No one knows. Now let me enjoy the heat, while I still can."

She turned away from him and walked into the gardens as the veil of clouds they called the Churn rolled on towards her.

## Part 4

"It was him."

"Are you positive?"

"Of course." She tapped her touchpanel confidently as her Second stood over her. The video image on her screen decayed into a stream of static as she wound it back through time, then entered the command to re-apply the encryption.

"Why do we have to re-construct these images each time we look at them?" her Second asked, shifting slightly.

"Security, security, my datajack," she told him. "Until the information lies deep behind the Morgan Industries firewalls..."

"He cares more about this data than he does us." She noticed the unconscious clenching of his fist.

"Yes," she drew out the syllable. "Now look..." The video feed had decayed to a stop and now reconstructed itself through three layers of encryption into a face, a hard face with deep black eyes.

"Chairman Yang," the Second said, startled. "Looking right at us."

"Right into the sunglobe, you mean. He was there, and then...it looks like he stepped through a hidden panel."

"Well, that's somewhat useful," said her Second. "Another datapoint for the psychchart."

"That we even know what base he's in is useful. Yang is extraordinarily cagey."

"Where is he going, do you think?" he asked her.

"To the surface, my datajack. It doesn't take a probe team to see that..."

## Episode 3

*It was time.*

Academician Prokhor Zakharov sat staring from his window-lined office above the half-formed jumble of towers that made up University Base. He slowly turned his head to look east, where his new Research Hospital was taking shape, his scientist-builders working wonders with salvaged metals and alloys pulled from Planet's strange crust.

He looked at it blankly and then turned away. He lifted a small glass of vodka, distilled in one of his own labs, and focused on the orange-red xenofields to the south that touched the edges of his territory like reaching fingers.

Here, under the darkness of the Churn, he could feel a malevolence rising off of the tendrils of fungus as they reached out toward his tiny settlement, his monument to the power of the human mind.

"What do they want?" he asked the empty room, his voice nearly inaudible.

No one knew. He looked at the papers on the surface of the smooth metal desk. There it was...the Churn had begun twelve days after the University discovery of the Alien Temple.

The alien *structure*, he reminded himself sternly. *We have no idea what it really is.*

He did not believe for a moment that prying open the low curved doors of the structure had caused the layer of clouds to sweep over the Human Settlements. There was no proof, no scientific proof at all.

Still, it was time. He had seen the temple through remote video feeds, but now he had to see it for himself.

He threw back the vodka and winced, quickly grabbing small chunks of chocolate bar from his desk to clear the taste.

Then he rose and headed out the door, exiting his tower.

## Part 2

Michael Regalis nodded to the guard stationed at the portable perimeter defense that University soldiers had set up around the Alien Temple. The defense even included a visual shroud, so he could not make out the detailing on the sides of the structure until the guard had checked his clearances and waved him through.

And then...Regalis' first look at the Temple did not hit him with force so much as put him off balance, upsetting his innate sense of harmony.

The xenofungus gave him the creeps, for one thing, covering the low hills around the Temple in layers that seemed unusually thick, and yet never touched the Temple itself. And the Temple...large and clearly formed from a non-human sensibility, it sat low to the ground, made of series of curves that surrounded a strange concave roof, open to the sky.

And open to the Churn.

When Regalis approached he could see that the Temple was made of a rocklike material covered with tiny pits and cavities. As soft breezes found their way down from the surrounding hills, they slipped around the curved buttresses of the Temple and made strange, almost flutey noises.

Should he? Shouldn't he? He looked around nervously. A small science train with two bright-eyed technicians on board scooted around the far side of the structure. No one seemed to be looking now.

*Now.*

He stopped and surreptitiously snapped a short vidclip with a tiny portable camera, then immediately encrypted it and uplinked it to a contact at Morgan TV. They would pay dearly for this one, he knew.

Letting go a deep breath, he slipped the camera into a uniform

pocket and continued on toward the Temple. It was time for his first shift.

### Part 3

Zakharov arrived and stepped through the massive open doors of the Alien Temple, three guards entering behind him. He surveyed the interior critically...the low arched walls, the strange patterns that covered every surface, and the broad, low platform directly opposite the doors.

“Academician,” said the tall, bony man who approached him carefully. “Welcome to our preservation efforts. You...” He motioned helplessly at Zakharov’s feet.

Zakharov looked down. He found himself standing astride a strange narrow channel carved into the floor, emanating straight out from the platform opposite the door. He clenched his jaw ...something about the configuration of the space made the central channel feel like a railroad track, something that might guide a force that could wipe a bystander out.

He ignored the implied request to move and stood his ground. “Greetings, Bortniansky. Tell me what you have found.”

One of the man’s bony hands plucked Zakharov’s sleeve and gave a single tug toward a nearby wall. “Well, here are the pits we told you about in our reports. See....” He ran his fingers carefully along the complex series of tiny holes and ridges along the wall, which looked like a cross between hieroglyphics and Morse code. “It’s incredible. These patterns are older than humanity, perhaps older than Earth itself.”

Zakharov stepped toward him and thrust a finger into one of the larger pits. “It feels solid. This is a strong material. It is good that it has held up for so long.” He looked around and then pointed at three yellow suited techs who stood around the platform opposite the entrance. “What are they doing over there?”

“We are working our way in that direction, Academician.”

Zakharov shook his head and headed for the three men. As he approached he saw that one of them held an airgun and was directing it at a series of unusually large and oddly shaped hollows that covered the center of the main wall behind the platform.

“What are you doing?” Zakharov asked.

“Trying to get a reading on the shape of these hollows, Academician,” the oldest of the men, a Swedish tech, answered. Zakharov watched them work, then glanced up. Through a tiny opening in the ceiling, he could see the dark clouds overhead. He frowned and looked down.

On the floor in front of the wall was a layer of crystalline gray dust, fine and sparkling. Zakharov knelt down and touched it, then scooped up a handful.

“Perhaps you should not touch...” whispered Bortniansky, then trailed off.

Zakharov pointed at one of the more elaborate hollows. “Direct the air here.”

One of the men did. Zakharov grabbed the man's hand and shifted it, changing the movement of the air, and as he did he released a fine trail of dust, which was caught by the air currents and bent around into an arc. He moved his hands and another arc formed, curving near the first.

“Hold the light there,” whispered Zakharov hoarsely, motioning to a place above the hollows. One of the technicians quickly obliged.

Zakharov opened his hand and let the sand flow. It curled and then caught the light, accented with strange shadows cast by ridges on the wall.

“Does it look like a face?” Zakharov whispered. The techs leaned in, and there, for a moment, a vague shape took form...long and strangely curved, with hollows for eyes, formed by a trick of dust and shadow. Then it vanished.

Zakharov remained staring at the space, then he straightened.

“Measure every square millimeter of this chamber, then pull it all down. I want the east and west walls shipped to University Base for full analysis.”

“But Academician,” protested Bortniansky, shaking like a reed in a storm. “We should not violate the sanctity...”

“There is no sanctity. I want this back at the lab,” said Zakharov, and motioned to his guards. “I will return to University Base, now. I want to know if we have seen...*faces*.”

## Episode 4

Bortniansky stood and watched as his technicians separated the surface of the East Wall from the structure of the Alien Temple. Large cutters adapted from equipment on the Unity made short work of the Temple's strange material, losing only fractions of millimeters from the cut.

But fractions mattered. They mattered!

"Step back, Academician," a cocky young lieutenant ordered him as the wall surface began to pull outward. Large cranes steadied the section.

"If it falls, let it crush me," Bortniansky muttered. "I can not stand this."

Slowly, carefully, the cranes lifted the huge section from the wall and set it on its edge, then lowered it onto a palette made of plastic honeycombs. As they let the piece down it boomed and the sound echoed richly through the hall.

The young lieutenant stared at the face of the wall now revealed, its "skin" peeled away.

"Don't move," whispered Bortniansky.

"Sir," stammered the young lieutenant. "We checked this. I fear our equipment was not good enough..."

Bortniansky ignored him and walked forward toward the newly revealed surface. The face of this wall was a study in contours, full of tiny pits, elaborate hollows, and ever stranger ripples and curves. the configurations stretched up and away, to the ceiling and out to both sides, a story inside the walls.

"This is a mistake," Bortniansky croaked. He looked to the main wall where two technicians had stopped working, measuring tools in their hands. "Stop working there. We will not cut into any more walls. The rest will be imaged and transferred by datalink."

"And what of this one?" the young tech asked, tapping the panel on the floor with his foot. "Zakharov wants it."

"This one we will send."

The lieutenant nodded. "I'll have it loaded onto the transport."

"No," said Bortniansky. "We will not be sending this by land. The land transport is a decoy."

"How then?"

Bortniansky stared at the panel on the floor. "This one goes by sea."

The wind in the chamber touched the newly revealed surfaces and began to sing.

## Part 2

Captain Ulrik Svensgaard stood on a quiet beach and watched the glint of metal on water. He squinted, stroked his long blonde not-at-all-regulation ponytail, spat a salty wad on the rough red sand, and looked through his farspecs again.

"Three ships. I didn't even know Zakharov had three ships."

"Those aren't ships," returned his wiry first mate. "One is a tug, the other nothing better than a floating box. The third, though...there are people in armor there. It could have some firepower."

"Really?" He arched a brow. "We are all too busy eking out our survival on land to mount cannon on our ships, don't you think? Even Morgan knows nothing of our little experiment."

"Yeah, Morgan would not approve." His first mate narrowed her sea green eyes and looked out at the ship again. The two remained silent for a few moments, the whistle of the sea winds on them.

"They are coming from the Temple," she said finally. "But why by sea?"

"Too frightened to stray near Miriam's territories," returned Ulrik. "But maybe we can give them a new reason to feel afraid."

"I don't think so," she said flatly. "It is too early."

He ignored her and signaled to a group of men and women standing by a rock outcropping a hundred meters away. Several of them looked up. "They appear ready. None of us are here to waste time."

"To strike too early would be a disaster," she said, low and angry.

"They are sitting ducks," said Ulrik. "But I will grant you this...we'll wait until night falls. With the Churn and the darkness, they won't know what hit them."

### Part 3

"I don't like this night travel," murmured Hefferan, leaning against the crude plastic railing of the escort ship. "At least on Earth we knew what the darkness held."

"Yes. It held quick death, sneak attacks, crazed victims of biological attacks. Or have you forgott..." Snowfire stopped, his eyes narrowing. "What was that?"

"What?" Hefferan craned his neck forward to stare out into a nearly impenetrable darkness. Snowfire scowled and took a scanner from his loosely-tied belt. He looked through the single lens and twiddled the controls. Several armed soldier/techs moved closer to him.

"Nothing." The word floated across the blackness of sea and sky.

"There is not an ounce of moonlight through the Churn," said Hefferan, an older scientist who had scored Expert on the marksmanship tests. "Bad luck that both suns are on the far side."

"There," said Snowfire, then swiveled the scanner. "Something... Does the navigator see anything on his scanner?"

"He would have said something," answered Hefferan. "There are native life forms in the fungus. Are there also ones out here?" The

older man looked down into the inky blackness around the ship. "Something must live down there."

"It's too dark," said Snowfire. "Let's not wait like this." He went down belowdeck and re-emerged a few moments later with a beacon gun. He aimed it low across the horizon and fired.

A bolt of white energy burst from the gun and arced low across the horizon, sending brilliant trails of light into the sea. The bolt went long and far, then faded down and away. A few moments passed in silence.

Suddenly a burst of yellow fire shot from the darkness of the sea and arced toward them. Snowfire watched it and then covered his face as the light grew brighter.

"That's not a flare! Hard to port!" he ordered.

The ship began to turn into the waves as the engines fired, sending the ship breasting the waves, propelled skyward by the engines' force. The yellow fire had now spun its way into a huge sphere of light that loomed above the ship, and Hefferan turned away from the heat. It passed over the ship and then there was a hiss as the sea boiled and steam rose in clouds.

"What was that?" shouted Hefferan. Two more flares thumped into the night sky and arced toward them.

"Full stop! Remain still!" shouted Snowfire. "These will miss us."

But three more thumps sounded on the horizon, and now five balls of yellow fire crossed the sky.

"We must protect the cargo ship," hissed Hefferan, helpless to fire his scoped rifle when he could not see the enemy.

"They're not firing at the cargo ship. They know what's on it. In fact," Snowfire tapped into his quicklink, contacting the pilot of the cargo ship. "Cargo, move your ship closer. We must bunch tightly."

"Too risky!" came the high pitched voice of the cargo ship's pilot. "They are trying to kill you."

"But not you. If we move closer it will be for the good of all."

The sea surged and roiled as the yellow fire rained down around them. Steam washed over Snowfire's face, scalding him.

"I don't agree!" the pilot warbled. "You distract them, we will run! We must protect the alien engravings!"

"If you run you are a sitting duck!" shouted Snowfire, then broke the link. He yelled to his own helmsman. "Move close to the cargo ship. I want to be able to spit in their pilot's eye if I want to. Stay close. Do not let them run."

The ship surged ahead. The bolts of fire launched from the distance had changed colors now, to blues and whites, smaller in size but filling the sky with their heat and power. Then, as the ships moved into a tight cluster, the fire stopped.

Snowfire and his crew waited for the unseen enemy that approached.

## Episode 5

Snowfire studied the sea. Between the thick layer of clouds overhead and the dusk caused by the position of the suns, the sea and sky blended into a world of darkness on darkness.

He rubbed the stock of his rifle, which he had assembled himself in the University labs, outfitting it with new explosive rounds of his own design. Around him stood other University guards, all with weapons out, scanning the sea.

"There they are," said Hefferan, looking through infrared scanners. Snowfire lifted his own farspecs and zeroed in on the same spot. A blob of moderate heat dipped and rose in the waves, heading their direction.

"Little more than a tug, as we suspected. That must have been a shore launched weapon, earlier."

"And it could be launched again, if they get what they want," said Hefferan.

"That won't happen," said Snowfire, and lifted his rifle. "Flames, projectiles, whatever you've got...hit them. We'll not risk our cargo."

And his first shot crossed the sea to strike the visitor.

## Part 2

Datatech Jellico of the post-Unity Graylink project dialed up a secure feed and began running decryption software on the seemingly random static that formed the stream.

As pass after pass of filtering software scanned the static, an image began to take shape, like a figure emerging from the snow.

"Information," she said in a deep, rich voice, and her Second rose from his deep padded chair to stand behind her and watch the image form.

"It is him!" said her Second. She nodded – the features were unmistakable. Somewhere in his domain, Executive Officer Yang, now Chairman Yang, stared unknowingly into one of their probe links. "The boss will want to know."

"A moment," she said. "Information is power, my datajack. And so we should ask ourselves...is this power we want to give?"

"To simply bury it lacks subtlety," her Second said with mild reproach.

She nodded. "Very true. They do not know our power, yet. But soon..." She looked up at him, her face bathed in the soft glow of her touchscreen. "I will flag it and pass it along the chain. But we will send it to the Underground as well. We may need it someday."

Her Second nodded.

### Part 3

At the first shot, a tongue of flame ran from the sea up the side of the enemy ship, and as Snowfire watched more shots arced into the dark blot of the target. Now the whole ship burned, the red flames mirrored in the black waters. Snowfire lowered his weapon for a closer look.

"We got it, S.F.!" exulted Hefferan, firing multiple pyro canisters with great accuracy.

"I know," said Snowfire. "Still..." He lifted his farspecs and scanned the enemy carefully.

"Still what?"

"The shape of the flames...it's too boxy. And there have been no explosions from engines or fuel."

"Perhaps it runs on shielded fuel cells. Or perhaps it's a..."

"Decoy," Snowfire said in a broken voice, then turned.

When the real ship emerged from the sea behind them, it came as a great shadow, outlined only by tiny pinpricks of silver-blue light. The ship was huge, far larger than Snowfire's escort ship, and along its gunwales waited a mass of shadowy forms, bristling with weapons.

"Why didn't the pilot warn us?" shouted Snowfire. But Hefferan just stood mute, looking at the few remaining pyro canisters at his feet.

"Surrender your cargo!" shouted a voice from the ship, young and cocksure.

"Pilot, run!" shouted Snowfire, and he took aim with his rifle as the larger ship drew closer. He shot, not at a person but at the railing they leaned against. His rifle shot exploded against a support and the whole railing pulled outward, the metal groaning, and several of the enemy fell outward and splashed into the darkened sea. Snowfire grinned in spite of himself.

"Forward!" came a shout, the same voice as before, and Snowfire saw a wiry man lift one hand and fire a shot into the air. A flare arced up overhead, the trail of fire sputtering high and then bursting into white fire over their heads. For a moment all of the ships were illuminated, and Snowfire saw his attackers – men and women, in thrown-together outfits rather than uniforms, their faces hard and eager to kill. And at their front stood a man with long blonde hair tied back in a long ponytail and a scarred face.

That man led the charge, leaping down onto the escort ship. A burst of fire issued from the enemy ship and Snowfire braced, only to see a tongue of fire burn into the cargo ship, crippling it. Then the attackers were upon him, swarming across the deck of the escort, strong sea legs holding them steady.

*This was a mistake, Snowfire had time to think. We never should have come by sea. This is their element.*

Snowfire began firing but the attackers outnumbered them. He saw Hefferan raise his pyro cannon and aim it, but then their leader was in front of him. Snowfire saw the man take a massive swipe with his own heavy rifle, smashing into Hefferan's weapon and denting the

barrel. The pyro canister misfired and exploded in Hefferan's hands, sending a burst of liquid fire back up his arms and into his face. Hefferan fell back, pools of fire running across his legs and then across the deck, burning the fallen.

Snowfire pulled a shredder pistol from his belt and fired at a scruffy brunette woman who tore ferociously into one of his people. He turned and ran around the cabin, trying to see how the cargo ship fared. Behind him he heard two more screams, both his own crew.

“Surrender,” came the calm, hard voice behind him. Snowfire whirled and lifted his pistol, only to find the wiry figure of the enemy leader against him, pressing his weapon hand aside. Then he felt cold metal in his ribcage.

“Don’t,” said Snowfire. One of the man’s eyes was gone, but the other stared at him with great intensity.

“Why not?”

“I have to know...the secrets of that.” He motioned to the cargo ship. “And you...who are you?”

The man smiled tightly. “I am Ulrik Svensgaard, a man who loves the sea.”

“You mean a pirate,” said Snowfire, and tensed to make a lunge away from him.

Svensgaard nodded. “Yes, a pirate,” he said, and Snowfire heard a bust of sound. An icy finger jabbed him in the ribs, followed by a warm fire and darkness.

## Episode 6

Prokhor Zakharov felt the blood leave his face. He looked down at his hands, hands growing older with every passing day, and studied them for a moment.

They had lost the East Panel of the Alien Temple.

"I'm sorry, Provost," said Bortniansky, his concerned face coming over the quicklink. "I can not help but think...we should not have desecrated..."

*"Desecration?"* Zakharov felt the heat of anger return the blood to his face.

"No, not in a religious sense, of course, Provost. I meant that pulling apart..."

"We were careful," said Zakharov. "But not careful enough. The others obviously want the information in the alien structure more than I knew, and they have resources dedicated to getting them." He let out a deep breath.

"Provost, if I may. We can bring in better imaging equipment, and create near perfect replicas back at the University. I know you wanted the real thing, but..."

Zakharov cut him off. "Of course, of course. You will image the temple and transmit the data along a secure channel, to be changed daily. But I will do more. We must protect the structure." He looked at his hands again. "We need an ally in this. We need to guard the structure, and guard it with force."

"Yes, of course," said Bortniansky, and feared for the fate of his temple.

## Part 2

"The man is burning us again." Jellico's eyes burned as she watched dataclouds form and disperse on her touchscreen. Where other

dataarchs liked to surf the clouds and zoom into the smallest details, she liked the long view, the faraway view, where data moved like weather patterns and one could see the butterfly wing that became the hurricane. "He thinks he leads us."

"There are advantages to that, Jellico." Her Second stood behind her. She turned to look at his solid face, set now into a heavy frown.

"Yes there are," she said, "but we get no respect because of it. And look at this..." She pointed to an encrypted order from Central.

"They want us to risk our brains, fry our neurons, to get them this data from the structure. Data we buy with the blood of our minds. They have no respect for us, here."

"We don't need respect," he answered. "We need anonymity, and we have it."

"No!" Her eyes flashed at him. "Not so. Respect is a commodity, and it can be traded on. It can buy entrance into forbidden spaces."

"But they will question us, Jellico," he answered. "When they know us, they will watch us." He watched her carefully. "What are you saying?"

"We should be known," she said. "We are strong enough."

He shook his head. "You are wrong." Her eyes flashed to him, angry, and he backed up a half-step. "You are wrong. Survey the Underground if you don't believe. Let them hear the arguments. But I must argue against you."

"You challenge me, Second?"

He nodded. Jellico considered for a moment. "Very well. But we know the Underground has already heard the arguments. It is a linked system." She stared at him until he looked away. "You are the identity known as Ghost. You are in the Underground, spreading your beliefs."

He shook his head. "Not true, leader. Not true..."

"I have traced you." She stood up "I know you. But you don't know

me. I am," she paused and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I am Sinder Roze."

"You! You are the identity preaching for independence?"

"Yes, my Second. And we will vote now." She fliplinked into the Underground, the secret cyberworld existing in the spaces between the new datalinks. And there she posed a question.

*Independence?*

As she and her Second waited a tally formed with blinding speed. The datacloud, thousands of identities, swirled and collected around one axis, and then the other. Yes, no, opinions formed and reformed, until the cloud coalesced around one answer only.

Independence. Sinder turned to her Second.

"You have sought to undermine me, Ghost, but the Underground has spoken. We will be known. And you will leave us."

He frowned, staring at the datacloud. Then he looked at her. "And you?"

She smiled. "I guess I am Sinder Roze, forever."

### Part 3

Reanna awakened in a sweat, so different from the calm peace that had possessed her since the Churn began. She gasped and touched her ears...surrounding her, she could hear a chorus of sound, humming off of the walls, and deep within that bed of sound she could hear the chattering of hundreds of strange voices, speaking in a language that seemed an echo of distant stars.

She pressed her ears more tightly, and the sound seemed to fade, but only a little. And now it seemed to her kind of...pleasant.

She got up and went out to the communal hall, padding on bare feet. She turned her head slowly, and with each turn the bed of sound shifted and changed, like light glittering off of a faceted

jewel.

She turned back...there, a young tech looked at her, his face pulled into a mask of concern. His lips moved but his voice seemed so far away, lost in the chorus of sounds around her.

She walked toward him. She felt as if she were floating. The chorus rose up around her.

The young man's lips moved again, but she could not hear him. She saw his face as if in close-up, the sweat forming at his hairline. He seemed so anxious.

She smiled at him and reached out to pat his hand. She felt him grab at her, felt him striking at her. She tried to shout, and the chorus turned into a screech, splitting her skull. She tried to shout again, and then blackness overwhelmed her.

## Episode 7

Reanna remembered. She remembered the day the two suns burned down from the sky, and the harsh calls of the attackers blended with the screams of the citizens in the tree lined streets of Gaian Base. Six years before...

*She staggered across her clean, small room, breathing heavily, hearing the tears in her own voice.* She clutched her belly, feeling its warm roundness, and deep genetic flares went off inside of her...protect this creature. She could feel the child in there, swelling and anxious (and after six months...only six Earth months!), and she clenched her muscles against releasing it into this world of fire. She could see the citizens outside in their green and white robes, grabbing their weapons and firing bolts in all directions.

Some kind of flash outside made her windows shunt to pitch black as the adjusters kicked in. When they faded again they were tinted blue, damaged. The shaded light and the cool feel of her walls gave her a moment of cocoon-like peace, and then a roar sounded outside and suddenly heat baked her face and torso as her outside wall melted down to a jagged line, poisonous vapor spewing out.

The fighting outside assaulted her senses...the lights and the sounds and the cries and the flames rushing skyward, gusting against her. She quickly rushed to her door and pushed it open, trying to retreat from the outside, deeper into the hab complex.

She looked down the long hallway to the exit. Coming toward her, still at a distance, strode a phalanx of Believers, their uniforms clean and sparse except for the holy symbols of rank on their arms, their eyes burning with a peculiar fire she could see even from this distance. *What has Miriam done?*

They were moving from door to door, blasting the locks and rooting out Gaians. They moved with a barely-controlled intensity she found almost awe-inspiring. One of them saw her and lifted his pistol. She half-turned and the man saw her belly and hesitated, for just an instant, and in that instant she lunged back into her room. Shredder bolts peppered the wall and cut into the flesh of her arm

as she retreated. She cried out as a burst of warm blood spattered her face.

*No time...*

She rushed to her bathing room and snatched a soft bandage from the supply cabinet and quickly bound it on her arm. Blood pattered down around her feet and she felt a wave of nausea pass over her, but she gritted her teeth and pulled the bandage so tight she gasped.

*Got to hold it together...*

Now she heard the rattling at her door. She turned to the vaporized wall and headed out into the storm of battle, clutching her belly.

## Part 2

Outside, she stuck close to the burning buildings, using their heat to mask her from the infrared seekers. Above her the higher greenhouses shattered as the Believers threw fire and fragments of metal into the loose confederation of Gaian buildings. She saw massive splinters of glass falling from the sky, raining down on the Gaian soldiers in their green body armor. She saw a triangle of glass bisect a man cleanly, and she turned away.

*That slender young man, months ago. The night on watch, out by the fields, as we put out the incense sticks and let the glowmites envelope us. The way his hands reached for me, with the glowmites exploding in my head...I know there were too many of them that night.*

She touched her belly. She hadn't bothered looking for that man again, his face lost in a haze of glowmite-induced hallucinations. But it didn't take long to know what their meeting had produced. And now, only six months (six!) later, she was about to see the fruits of it.

She stumbled into a skirmish, Miriam's fanatical shock troops throwing themselves into the Gaian citizens and soldiers. She was so close she could see them, could see the ecstasy in their eyes, as they cast themselves forward and into a void that welcomed them.

*There.*

A Rover, unattended, sitting idle near the skirmishers. And as she moved toward it she heard the shattering above her head and then felt a coolness across her back. She reached back, craning her arm to touch...glass. Her mind rebelled, imaging the darts cutting into her, past her spine, daggers aimed to the heart of her child...

The child that was coming.

She staggered forward to the rover and climbed in. She pounded the navscreen, entering random coordinates into the autopilot. The rover lurched forward and she saw a Believer go down under it. Then the rover shot around the periphery of the base and into the tongues of rich red xenofungus that licked the edges of the base.

The xenofungus throbbed with life, agitated at all the violence, perhaps. She could feel its thoughtprobes in her mind, causing the world to waver and jolt around her. She had no resistance. She felt a madness overtake her, like colored lights resolving into hypnotic patterns, all bathed in red.

She felt her child coming. And as the rover's wheels hung up in the fungus and flipped, casting her out and into the arms of Planet, she felt her child coming strong.

A child of Planet.

## Episode 8

"We must know who the father is." Lady Deirdre lifted one hand and gestured coolly at the trembling woman who stood before her. The woman, Reanna, had a face that seemed as fragile as glass, and Deirdre could see her eyes tear up.

"I am not sure. I can not tell you, Lady. A soldier..."

"There is no genetic match to any of our citizens on record," Deirdre continued. Reanna turned her head and her eyes defocused, as if she were hearing a strange sound. Deirdre could hear nothing.

"Zakharov has provided me with the Settlement's genetic records. Of course, he wants to know, just like all of us, who this...child...is that leads these troops against him."

"I don't know who he is," said Reanna. "But I know why you and the others want him." Deirdre could not help staring...Reanna's hands shook so much they appeared sometimes as a pale blur. "The child has something, a small piece, of what you all want."

Deirdre arched a narrow brow. "And what is that?"

"The *resonance*. A piece of the resonance."

"Resonance?" Deirdre shook her head and turned away from Reanna, walking lightly to the large windows that looked out over Planet's surface. "What is resonance? What does that have to do with anything?" She turned back to Reanna. "Explain yourself."

"This child has taken a piece of Planet, a chunk of its flesh."

"You mean the structure?"

Reanna's head snapped around again, and she pushed her blonde hair away to touch one of her ears. "Not its structure. Not flesh, but spirit. There is something...out there...that wants it all back...all of Planet back."

Deirdre stared at Reanna. She had the certainty of madness. "Who wants it? This child?"

"No. He...my son...is only a byproduct. The being or beings that wants it...their voice is all around us. The thing they want cries out to them."

## **Part 2**

Chairman Domai lifted one hand and stopped his troops on the ridge overlooking the Alien Temple. Behind him two hundred men and women came to a stop, their eyes focused woodenly ahead.

Domai, leader of the Free Drones, surveyed the land below. Zakharov had erected a low barrier around the Alien Temple, and guards patrolled at regular intervals. The guards held powerful laser weapons with finely-tuned sighting mechanisms, and they wore powered armor. Domai had approached the temple through the xenofungus, but he would not be surprised if Zakharov's scanners had already pinpointed his approach.

Domai did not have the complex weapons or technology of Zakharov, or the cunning of the Data Angels. But he had his Drones, the working outcast of Planet, stubborn and nearly impervious to pain. He looked at his own strong hands, and imagined them closing around a Talent's throat.

Strong hands and an iron will. It had brought him far. And as Domai watched, he remembered...

## **Part 3**

Domai sat at the edge of his bunk, staring at his hands. The lights remained dim, as Central required, and all of the other drones slept their dreamless slumber.

But Domai could not sleep. He sat in the low-ceilinged Drone Barracks room on the edge of his narrow metal bunk and stared at his hands, hands cut and scratched from hard labor. And as he stared, slowly...thoughts...began to form, swirling and gathering in the cavern of his mind. Thoughts of a different time, of rich smells and fluid speech, debates and drinking, and the feel of fine cloth on his arms, and people saluting him. Dim memories, slipping away

from him, behind a wall of thick fog.

*The fog of poisonous yellow gas, and blackness.* People grabbing at him, his mind screaming in horror, but he could not speak...his tongue remained thick and useless. And later as the blue-suited medical techs pulled him from the tangle he tried to speak, but his thoughts would not form, as of lost in a vast dark maze.

His hands. A Talent had been crushed by a falling support yesterday. Domai had found the man and stood over him as blood leaked from under flesh and metal. Urgent thoughts sparked in Domai's brain, but his muscles stayed heavy and noncommittal. Domai could only...stare.

He stared at the Talent's hands, which were not different from Domai's hands, except for the thickness. And the fear in the man's wide black eyes ads he lay bleeding under the metal was not so different from Domai's fear when the psych whips struck his back, except perhaps that Domai's fear was slower to rise, and thus more manageable.

He looked at the walls around him. This space, cramped and dark, seemed so small and stifling under the dim yellow lights of the buzzing glowlamps.

A buzzer sounded, harsh and jagged. The full lights came up, bright in his eyes. A metal door clanged open, and fifty Drones rose from their bunks. Domai stood with them.

## Part 4

Domai watched the overseers in the mess hall. He stared at the menacing blue figures that lurked at the room's edges, pacing along the length of the plain metal curve of corrugated metal that made up the Drone Mess.

One of the seated drones, Kohai, turned his head slowly and reached out to take a nutrient stick off of his neighbor's tray. Kohai was big and dull-eyed, a drone full of spite and bitterness, and had two huge fists and a strong back from working on the skyfarm

assembly line. But his neighbor, Pankol, was not small either.

*The wise man sets pride aside in favor of accomplishment.* Now where had that come from, leaping into Domai's brain?

Pankol reached out and put Kohai's hand in a crushing grip. The two Drones stood slowly, dull gray eyes staring into each other, smoldering. Pankol lifted his tray and smashed it into Kohai's left cheekbone; the Drones' thoughts were slow but once engaged their actions were swift. Now the two were at it, Kohai hooking bony fingers into Pankol's throat muscles.

*It's going to take at least four of the overseers to break this one up,* thought Domai, and then he felt an unusual thrill, the thrill of recognition, as he looked around at all the dull-eyed but ferociously sturdy drone workers around him. *It would take two of them to stop only one of us.*

He looked at all of the dull eyes, turned to watch the two combatants tear apart the metal mess table as they fought. The watching Drones did not move, but Domai could see vague thoughts forming behind black eyes. And the eyes grew blacker as overseers moved in to pound the two Drones into submission.

Two Drones...Pankol and Kohai. *They have names.*

Domai stood. In some deep part of his brain the image flashed of a noble man dressed in silk rising to give a toast on ravaged Earth. And that man's hands were the hands of a leader.

Domai tapped the two drones next to him and motioned them into the fray. Picking up a metal tray from the table, he went in as well.

## Episode 9

"Transmission incoming," said the nervous voice. As Zakharov watched, the flat panel on the wall over his desk resolved into the image of a narrow, sweaty face. "OK, we're here, Academician."

"Show me what's happening, Dmitri" said Zakharov.

"Yes, Academician," said the contact, Dmitri. The camera jerked away from him. Zakharov could see the low, curved shape of the alien temple, and then the purple-black clouds of the Churn overhead. Those clouds rippled outward in great rings. Zakharov suppressed a feeling of fear and told himself to study the data on the cloud formations later.

"Here we go," said Dmitri. The camera steadied on the energy shield and visual shroud that ringed the Temple, then the shroud flickered as the polarizing filters switched on. Stretching away from the Temple, Zakharov could see dusty red-brown earth, and then the thick tendrils of xenofungus.

"Turn on the infrared," Zakharov heard, and within a thick mass of xenofungus above the Temple a couple hundred shapes appeared. They stood absolutely still, and their bodies seemed unusually thick and strong.

"The Drone revolt army," said Zakharov.

"Yes, Academician," said Dmitri. "It doesn't appear that they have overly sophisticated weapons. Still, no one wants to fight a drone in close combat. Many of us haven't been friendly to their kind. Now..."

The camera swiveled past the Alien Temple again to the other side. There was no need for infrared on this side, since the xenofungus sat much father back from the Temple.

Standing in a mass about 200 meters from the shroud were a thousand ragged-looking warriors, their bodies lean and narrow, wearing pieces of armor that were of poor quality but colored

bright red and gold. Standing in front of them, between four huge bodyguards, was a small child, about six years old, holding a small bright dagger in one hand.

"Cha Dawn and his Cult," said Dmitri.

"How long have they been standing that way?" asked Zakharov.

"About...four metric hours now," said his contact. "It seems the Child has not taken his eyes off of the Temple. I don't think he even blinks."

Zakharov turned to the tall, pale woman who stood next to his desk. Her eyes stared blankly back at him, but Zakharov knew that behind those eyes an inhuman intelligence saw and processed.

*I am a creature of the mind as well,* Zakharov mused. *Do people find me as inhuman as this one?*

"The child is a fanatic," she said in a strangely flat voice. "He wants the Temple."

"Are the Drones allied with him?" Zakharov wondered. The woman made him uneasy. He knew she could run calculations faster through her cybernetic consciousness than he could through his beloved gray matter.

"It seems too unlikely a coincidence otherwise. The Drones are independent but still impressionable. Perhaps the Child has promised them something if they take the Temple."

"Maybe he promised them a home," said Zakharov. "Regardless, there aren't many Drones in this force."

"They are not afraid to die," said Aki. "But neither are my kind. The Consciousness pledges its support to you, in return for all of your information on the alien structure."

"Of course," said Zakharov. "But we'll wait for them to make the first move."

## **Part 2**

Deep in the blue-lit halls of Ergonomia Base, Sinder Roze tapped up a security matrix and surfed her way into the outer fringes of the University datalinks. She located a communication node, jacked into it, and transferred a command. Her eyes glowed with pleasure as she keyed in the final command sequence.

At the alien temple, the shield and the shroud vanished in an eyeblink.

## **Part 3**

Reanna opened her wide blue-black eyes to the sound of a hum so loud it jarred every bone in her body, and made her flesh shiver.

She reached out with her sense-awareness that had grown more acute with each passing day, and found that this sound bed filled her home valley with an ocean of harmonic waves.

She flipped on her vidscreen and scanned the datalinks. There was great unrest, starting with the marching of the new Cult warriors, led by a child, on Zakharov's fortification around the Alien Temple. And the new Drone unrest, which had halted the building of new med facilities, along with rumors of a Drone Army detonating charges and collapsing Yang's fledgling underground society.

And above it all were the dark clouds, rippling out in waves. And down here she could feel the waves of sound increasing, rippling out in waves, as if from a source far away, that now grew closer.

The sound reached a high pitch, splitting her brain and transforming into a small, bright light in her head. And the light became Planet against the sweep of space, and Planet became a field of energy, unfolding in vast harmonic petals.

"It is this," she said with a sudden realization, the vision burning in her mind's eye. "They are coming for this."

## **Part 4**

Cha Dawn, the Child of Planet, felt his heart pound as the shroud and the shield dropped from around the Alien Temple. He caught his first glance of the Temple, with its low curved shapes and strange symbols.

He lifted his gleaming dagger and swept it across his forces. He looked at them, with their tattered armor and hungry eyes, and relished the moment. He could feel their anticipation wash over him and feed him.

He gave the order in a high, screeching voice. “Now!”

His forces thundered forward. His four carriers lifted him on a golden platform and joined the charge. He exulted in his warriors surging around him like an unstoppable tide.

## **Part 5**

Domai saw the shield drop from around the Alien Temple and waited for the repercussions to percolate through his mind. He nodded.

He did not know if Zakharov was aware of his presence in the xenofungus, but now it did not matter. He could see the Child and his army sprinting toward the Temple. He knew the time had come.

He and his Drone Army gathered themselves and marched forward into combat.

## **Part 6**

As Cha Dawn approached the Temple he could see a low line of metal crates set in a ring around its entrance. Behind the crates were crouched a mix of University guards holding sleek new weapons, and waxy, expressionless figures in white armor that he recognized as members of the Consciousness.

His army did not stop. On the other side of the Temple he could see the Drone Army marching in uneven columns and opening fire on the left flank of the Temple’s defenders.

Cha Dawn's first wave vanished in a wave of fire and a hail of hard, explosive slugs from the Temple, but his army did not stop. As Cha watched, the enemy Consciousness fired off powerful shredder rounds in perfectly timed bursts, while the University guards directed bolts of fire at the extreme ends of his force.

Five of Cha's warriors sprinted forward and threw themselves into one of the barricades, overturning the metal crates and revealing a cadre of University technicians and two tall Consciousness shells. They ripped into the enemy and more Cult warriors ran to the breach, many falling under hails of fire. Cha could see University guards breaking and running, as more white-suited shells emerged calmly from the Temple.

He saw his people begin to spread out behind the barricades. He gestured eagerly and his carriers ran toward the breach, several more warriors lunging in front of them to deflect any oncoming fire.

More University guards ran forward to try and close the breach, but Cha's warriors cut them down with crude metal blades and rebuilt Unity pistols. Cha saw one burly University tech fall to the ground and he jumped down from his gold platform to thrust his dagger into the man. He felt alive with power and divine guidance.

Above him, the clouds gathered in a spot above the Temple and pressed down on the battle below. The clouds continued to grow thicker and darker, as if the entire sky of Planet was being pulled to this point.

Fighters on both sides stopped to look into the sky. An electric energy had filled the air; Cha could feel it on his back and crackling in his hair. He felt a strange sensation in his chest, as if the air had turned to lightning.

The sky split open with a flash of purple fire, shredding the heavy cloud cover into fragments and opening the sky. Another flash of purple followed, throwing the entire landscape into bold relief. Humans were tossed to the ground like discarded trash, and from the distance, two streaks of colored fire approached Planet like rockets from the heart of a distant sun.

## Part 7

Reanna staggered into the fields outside of her hab dome, a white robe wrapped around her. The purple fire had rocked her senses... she could not see anymore, and could only hear a deep bed of sound like a roar that pulsed in the ground. But she could still somehow see/feel the distant hills, where the xenofungus shimmered like pebbles under rushing water. And she could hear the tendrils and nodules scream.

She pulled her white wrap more tightly about her and shivered against the cold, clammy wind which filled the vacuum left by the purple wave. The Churn had broken out into tatters across the sky, a collection of residual Planet power that whirled out to welcome the Arrival.

And now Reanna could see/feel the white lines of energy above Planet, the wayward comet trails of the things that raced for the surface, and whatever Planet held.

There were people around her. She could feel them, with their upturned faces. She could feel apprehension quivering in their jelly eyes.

The two streaks drew a harmonic riff across the dome of sound that engulfed her. That riff changed everything, but subtly, adding unfamiliar cadences to the Planet chorus. Above her a column of fire burned down from sky to ground, with a strange smooth shape at its head. Reanna screamed.

Something struck the earth like a giant fist, knocking her to the ground. Somewhere, in the distance, a second strike rocked the world.

All across Planet, humans stopped and watched the sky, and forgot about their weapons for just a moment. New beings emerged from ships as strange and old as the void of space, and the fear of change washed across the world.

Something had arrived, or two somethings, and Reanna could feel within her the ancient hatred they felt for each other.

And the inhabitants of this world were caught in the crossfire.

**NOTE:** This is the conclusion of Centauri: Arrival. Thank you for following the story, and we hope you have enjoyed it! (Feedback email to [mely@firaxis.com](mailto:mely@firaxis.com))